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Agora One

A Space Adventure

Todd Borho

Chapter 1

Earth Year 2578

A mix of laughter from a dozen eclectic species bounced around in a thousand different directions. Over 3,000 watched and listened attentively from their prime positions within the sold-out, sparkling new venue. Another couple hundred watched from the hovering balconies in the deluxe suites that towered over the spectacle. And tens of thousands more were tuning in remotely with gadgets and gizmos that allowed for a 3D experience from up to hundreds of light years away.

The human on stage strode around and laughed to himself a bit before continuing. It really was hard to believe, some of the truth he was spouting from human history. “So another strange habit that people had way back in that little backwoods corner of the Milky Way galaxy, on a little planet called Earth, was something called property tax.”

A hologram of a small house appeared over the man on stage. He smiled and his eyes quickly took notice of his bright, see-through surroundings. “So this is my house. I built it. It’s mine.” A hologram of a big, grisly looking character in a uniform appeared and knocked on the flickering front door. The showman feigned surprise and answered the door. The grisly character spoke plainly, “You’re overdue on your property tax. Pay up or else.”

The smiling showman slapped his face in mock distress, “And if I don’t allow you to extort me, then what will happen?”

“I’ll beat you up and take your stuff.”

“And what will those plunderous, ill-gotten profits be used for?”

“The government will use the profits to protect you and the rest of society.”

The showman’s eyeballs ballooned as he face-palmed at the scathing contradiction that once passed for the norm in human

society on Earth. “So the government needs to rob me, in order to protect me?”

“Yep, that’s how a free society functions,” the grisly character said flatly.

The crowd was in fits of guffaws at the insane contradiction.

The showman pulled out a holographic pistol, pointed it at the uniformed goon on his electric doorstep and yelled, “Righteous self-defense! Get off my property!”

The pixelated 3D pirate in uniform ran away screaming. Raw grinned ear to ear. When he put the pistol in the illusory holster on his hip, they both flickered out of sight.

The crowd lost control and was in fits at the absurdity of it all.

Meet Raw. An intergalactic, historical comedian. He had gained popularity by telling it like it is, or was, rather. He told stories about how human society on Earth used to “function”. It was comical in some respects, in a tragic way, that is, but comical nonetheless. At least, it was comical to anyone living in the beauty and freedom of a voluntary society, such as the fine folks on Agora One, that is. And in many places in the universe, for that matter. So Raw, fully human, with droopy eyes and an irresistible baby face, had found a niche on stage. This was his first performance on Agora One, a big break in his young career.

Then a wicked jolt rocked the scene. Raw’s first thought as he literally hit the deck was, “That’s not part of the act.”

Bodies fell to the floor and heads knocked against unforgiving surfaces.

Transmission ended.

Emergency power on.

Cue apologetic message from the owners of the venue.

“Due to unforeseen technical difficulties, the show cannot continue. We apologize for any inconvenience, and reparations will be made accordingly.”

Disgruntled murmurs dominated the airwaves for a brief moment as the spectators filed out. The showman sighed and

marched out as well. He speed-walked past the meandering crowds in the wide, maze-like walkways. “Call Zay.”

An annoyed female voice entered the showman’s ear, “I don’t wanna hear it, Raw.”

Raw countered, “Zay, what the hell happened? I got thrown down like a rag doll.”

“A what?”

“Not important. Now what happened?”

Zay said in a rushed tone, “Inertial control problems again. It was only a millionth of a degree off, but ya know, at these speeds…..”

Raw massaged his achy shoulder, “I’d hate to see a full failure.”

Zay hollered to someone in the distance, “No, not over there! On the left, please!...Anyway, I gotta go, Raw. We’re docking in a few hours, and you know what a big deal this is...”

“Yeah, yeah, I know what a big deal it is.” He waved a finger and cut the communication.

A big, intergalactic deal. The ship they were on, Agora One, was the first of its kind. It was a moon-sized marvel capable of intergalactic travel in about one Earth month. It was less than three months into its maiden voyage and would soon be docking at one of the biggest trade expos in the known universe, the Sombrero 13 Galaxy’s one-and-only triennial (in Earth years) Trad’is’imo’ Festival.

Agora One was holding 70 percent of its 100,000 sentient life form capacity at that particular moment, and it was expected to be full by the time it was finished at Trad’is’imo.

The concept of Agora One was simple enough. An intergalactic ship that would serve as a traveling trade hub between hundreds of species and be a temporary or long-term home to tens of thousands at any given time. Complete with docking facilities, it allowed for passers-by in the cosmos to park their smaller vessels, do what they wished aboard Agora One (provided it was in accordance with Natural Law) and take off again on a whim. Business center, vacation retreat, permanent

residence, and an intergalactic ferry. Agora One was meant to serve all those purposes. It had its own various environmental systems, with higher and lower oxygen levels as each species required, or no oxygen at all in some cases, such as with the Heliumites. They required a helium-rich environment to live in, and so a fraction of the ship was controlled in such a manner as to accommodate them whenever they were aboard.

It had parks, multi-tiered gardens, game rooms, sensation parlors, gambling halls, saloons, and all the entertainment trappings that any city was expected to have. It was all privately owned. Some of the personal habitats were inhabited by individual owners, but most of them were rented. The ship's infrastructure, core services, and operations control were all privately owned by less than a hundred individuals from various parts of the universe, but a great many of them were human, and the idea for the ship itself had actually been from a human. Decisions about the route of the ship were decided by a small committee that held a majority stake in the core services and infrastructure. Anyone on the ship who didn't wish to follow the direction that the ship took was free to leave at any time. It was all voluntary. The ship is going one way. If you don't like it, you're free to leave. You're free to get your own ship and give us some healthy competition, too.

The ship had no captain. There was a small group of biological pilots, engineers, hosts, security, and other personnel who held a private ownership stake in the ship. There was also an assortment of synthetic beings, or "Artificial Intellects", A.I. for short. These helped with logistics, maintenance, and many of the technical aspects of the grandiose vessel.

And the damned inertial control, one of the most basic essentials for biological life forms to survive space flight, was on the fritz. Again.

An hour later, and the historical comedian known as Raw contacted the head pilot again. "What now, Raw?"

"Tequi is docking. Wanna join me on the welcoming committee?"

Zay thought for a moment as her bright, narrow eyes unfocused and relaxed. Her shiny, rainbow colored tail whipped like clockwork behind her. “Not sure how relaxing encountering Tequi might be. And why is he docking now, anyway?”

“Couldn’t wait for the trade show, I guess. I dunno. It’s Tequi. Maybe he’s overindulging in his product. Who knows? You in or out?”

“You’ll find out when you get there.” She cut the call, smiled, and lashed out her thin, trident-shaped tongue with satisfaction.

They met on a terrace overlooking the docking bay where Tequi’s favorite star cruiser, Turbo, was about to land. “He’d better not try and land manually again,” Zay said half-jokingly. Raw’s bushy eyebrows shot up over his perpetually droopy eyes, “He’s never done that, has he?”

“On more than one occasion, that I’m aware of, anyway.”

They stared out into the seemingly infinite space beyond the triple-paned force field gateway that stood between them and the cold, deadly reaches outside. A ferocious machine approached from behind and evened itself out with the docking bay. It was silent to human ears because of the sound suppressing function built into the smart material exterior. Otherwise, it would make someone deaf twice before they consciously knew that they’d heard anything. Brilliant lights from the angular, gem-shaped craft were not so forgiving. Zay and Raw shielded their eyes and cursed their incoming companion.

A few buzzes and hisses later, and the sleek star cruiser was resting safely and securely in the docking bay, without a scratch on it and its inhabitants of sound mind and body. Well, relatively speaking.

A broad-shouldered human with rugged and handsome features, salt-and-pepper hair, a floppy cowboy hat, a pistol on each hip, and a flamboyantly boyish grin strode down the walkway from his ship and onto the shiny gray flooring of Agora One’s docking facility.

Meet John “Tequila” Vox. Nobody called him John, or Mister Vox. He was known throughout multiple galaxies simply as “Tequi”, short for tequila, of course. Tequi was a space cowboy, ya might say. He was an adventurer, tequila craftsman, entrepreneur, and a maddeningly difficult individual to read. Straight shooter and stone-faced on the one hand, while over-the-top sarcastic on the other. He was hard to figure. His family had been crafting tequila for centuries, almost since humans had been in deep space. He was born on a small desert planet in Sombrero Galaxy 13. He was fully human, biologically, but he, like all humans in this time period, had never been to Earth.

Following close behind him was Dans, a fast-talking native from Tequi’s home planet. Dans, like all of her species, was made of trillions of bits of intelligent sand, that ran in perpetual motion throughout their lifetime. She talked fast, moved fast, and did damn near everything fast, which is why she made for such a fantastic personal assistant to Tequi. She wasn’t to be female much longer, though. Like all of her species, she was only female the first half of her life, then male for the finale. And she was nearing the change and hadn’t bore any children, so, as one might imagine, she was in a bit of an aggressive posturing as far as mate-seeking was concerned.

Raw and Zay strolled down a transparent ramp to meet the newcomers. Tequi’s hands were full. He proudly held out two bottles, identical in curved shape and mint green color. “I come bearing gifts! One for each of ya. Reposado infused with Biscanna Berry, and a touch of Nocup to make sure there are no lingering effects in the morning.” He smiled widely. They graciously accepted and, before they could utter anything, Dans started spewing as she laid three rapidly rotating brown eyes on Raw, “It sure is a pleasure to meet you, sir. Could I have your name please? Do you have any children?”

Zay and Raw looked at each other awkwardly with mouths agape, not sure how to react. Tequi broke in, “Now you just hold on, Dans. Look, I understand your predicament, but ya can’t just go around like that being so forward with other species. You

know that. Anyway, humans aren't compatible with your species. It literally is a physical impossibility to..."

"I'm flattered," Raw said with a sly sheepishness. "But Tequi's right."

"And he's spoken for," Zay said with a smirk as she clasped Raw's hand.

Dans, undeterred, commented while looking at Zay's flashy red and white skin, "Zay, your parents were incompatible species as well, but there are scientific procedures that made it possible for you to be created."

It was true. Zay's mom had been human. Her dad was Songardian. She had been created out of the womb. Her mother and father wanted a child so badly, but knew of the physical incompatibilities between species. They had an experimental procedure done, and it had worked flawlessly. Zay was a new type of hybrid. Half human and half Songardian. A first in the universe.

Zay's eyes were now saucers, "Well, I dunno about you all, but I didn't come down here to spend my precious time talking about experimental species blending procedures, so how about we take a walk? This is your first time on Agora One, right? Unless you've got some cargo to attend to, Tequi."

"Nope. This is a personal visit only. Got tons of cargo already down for the trade show."

They started walking out of the docking bay and into a long, enclosed transport corridor. On one side of the corridor it was completely transparent, and a tempting glimpse into the edge of the city could be seen. Oval-shaped pods were streaming by quickly and perpetually. Zay said, "These transport corridors run all over the ship. I'll tell you the magic words to make a pod stop later. Let's walk."

They took steps that led in an arch over the transport pods and back down to the other side of the corridor, where a large, arched door slid open and they went into the "open air". Tequi's head craned skyward so fast his cowboy hat almost took a tumble.

They had entered the core habitation area, where the bulk of the populace of Agora One lived. Thousands of feet up, a few fluffy white clouds were meandering around in the artificial air currents. A few big-headed, rail-thin Heliumites floated by, their Helium supplies provided by an invisible tank that was protected by a force field. Gaudy lights flashed from multiple angles. Dozens of species walked, floated, or spun by. An anti-gravity fountain, that was on its regular, elliptical route, slowly crept nearer. Multi-tiered buildings with terraces galore shined. Many were housing units, others were commercial, some were both. Nearly all were made of nano-flex materials and other exotic elements, which allowed for greater flexibility in case changes were desired.

A couple of tipsy, floating furballs accidentally slammed into Tequi. “Watch it, furball.”

Six twisted eyeballs popped out from the floating furball, “Ez’rah’me!”

Tequi face-palmed as the others laughed at his expense. Tequi shouted, “Your translator isn’t working!”

The furball wobbled in mid-air. Zay said, “The furball said excuse me. Or, tried to, anyway. He’s had a few drinks.”

Tequi looked surprised, “You speak Ducled?”

“I speak Ducled.”

Zay spoke ten languages fluently, actually. And had passable skills in three others. Typical Songardian, quite a masterful species when it came to languages. She also had other attributes of Songardians, such as visual acuity ten times better than humans, and able to zoom in from up to 100 kilometers away. Her reflexes were also three times faster than the typical human, and she put this to good use by being a multi-tiered champion in two different forms of martial arts. And she was the top pilot of the fanciest, newest, and highest technological marvel this side of Andromeda, Agora One. In short, she was a major certified bad ass with a minor in kick ass. She was also torn between two species, though, human and Songardian. And nothing she ever did was good enough for her father. She also

had never been to Earth, knew very little about Earth, and had almost zero desire to know it.

They kept walking and made their way to one of the more low-key corners of the flying marvel, a little bar with low lighting and thick, dark wood décor called Zip's.

Raw chastised playfully, "Pilot number one drinking on duty?"

"I'm off duty, wise guy."

They grabbed a corner table and browsed an extensive cocktail list from a colorful, holographic menu just above them. The place had a low, energetic buzz in the air and was nearly packed. A mish-mash chatter of multiple species gave a surreal ambiance to the swanky digs.

A Cascadian waitress came over promptly and greeted them. Tequi was taken aback, "Service from a real life form?"

A handful of Artificial Intellects took exception to that and threw disapproving glances in response. Zay explained, "Lots of service and hospitality on this ship is done by biologicals."

Tequi marveled, "Well, ain't that a kick."

Raw laughed, "I love your archaic quips."

"You're heard that one before?"

"Of course. I'm a history buff, remember?"

They ordered their drinks and the Cascadian flowed away gracefully. Dans bent her thin, swirling neck down and said in a hushed tone, "Don't look now, but an irresistible looking Talem is floating this way."

They naturally all turned, much to the chagrin of Dans. Tequi commented, "I call them crushers." He called them that for good reason. Talems were a very unique species from Cigar Galaxy Eight. They looked pretty much like a bowling ball, except for the holes. They were made of a sort of intelligent semi-metal that was naturally occurring on their home planet. They had no limbs, so they didn't walk, but floated and flew instead. They didn't have mouths or any other cavities. All of their communication was completely telepathic among themselves, but around other species, they used their mental

powers to create movement of sound waves that mimicked a voice. Most striking of all was their density. They were a hundred times denser than lead. This gave them extremely unique abilities, such as crushing, for example. Another "talent" they had was that they were extremely absorbent, and so had quite the ability to drink copious amounts of libations. They were also slightly malleable, if they so desired, and could change some of their outward appearance on a whim. For example, since they had no face, if they wanted to give off a more comforting look to another species, say, human, then they could change their structure to show a makeshift eye on their "body", or a smile, etc. And one last thing of note is they could occasionally be clumsy, which had a high potentiality to create accidental mini-disasters.

Zay said with amusement, "That's one of Agora One's private security." She smiled and waved as his slick, gunmetal gray, bowling-ball-like body floated within earshot. "Hey Tabe!"

Tabe floated near them at eye level and created a steely curled "lip" and an "eye" on his figure. "Tequi, just the guy I wanted to see."

Tequi grinned, "Likewise. Your super-absorbent kind are my best customers."

"Feel like a drinking duel?"

"No, I don't feel like dying."

"I'll even let ya use a detoxer at the table."

An ice cold two liter bottle of Triskimo Ale hovered just above Tabe and tipped over, sending effervescent light-blue liquid splashing down. Tabe absorbed it as fast as it fell, set the empty bottle on the table, admired the astonished looks of the others, and went on casually, "Tequi, I haven't seen you since the Tooz adventure."

Zay gave Tequi an astonished glance and flicked her whip-like tongue, "What were you doing on Tooz? Aren't they having an intercontinental war right now?"

"Well," Tequi began somewhat defensively, "I know what you're thinking. Yeah, the Tooz, overall, are still highly ignorant and immoral people. And that's true. However, there are small

pockets that have developed recently. Knowledge of Natural Law is getting around and there are some gray and black markets, real free markets, popping up. I went to Tooz to deal only with them, I'll have you know."

Zay turned her red and while shimmering face to the floating bowling ball, "And you? What was your deal there?"

"Exotic weapons, of course. That's my main gig. I only do private security part-time."

"Dealing weapons on a planet controlled by authoritarian thugs?"

Tequi scratched at one of his scruffy cheeks, "Just because 90 percent of the population lives an immoral lifestyle, doesn't mean that we should avoid the other 10 percent that know whatsup."

Raw chuckled and smacked Tequi on the back, "I love your archaic English slang, 'whatsup'. Hilarious."

Tequi said thoughtfully, "And don't ya know that it was a minority that left Earth centuries ago? A tiny group that knew right from wrong and fled the terror of the state on their own planet? That's why we're here. 500-year-old news flash."

Zay rolled her eyes. She knew almost nothing about Earth, and didn't care to. She was only half human, anyway.

Tabe said, "Well, it's a good thing they got off Earth, otherwise your whole species might have perished."

Everyone looked at Tabe awkwardly as he absorbed another bottle. Tabe said curiously, "What? What's with that look? I've become quite adept at reading human facial expressions."

Raw said, "What do you mean by what you said? Why would all humans have perished?"

Tabe read the expressions quickly and figured they didn't know. "You didn't hear?"

"Hear what?" Tequi asked anxiously.

"Word is that all humans got wiped out from Earth. Gone. Poof."

Raw leaned forward with elbows planted firmly on the hardwood, “A.I. too?”

“From what I heard, yeah. All beings with higher cognitive processes. Lots of animals got wiped out, too, apparently.”

“How do you know this?”

“Well,” Tabe began, “A reliable source, let’s put it that way.”

Eyeballs flashed and darted around the table. Raw twisted his lips and narrowed his eyes, “Reliable source, huh?” He turned to Zay. Her face flared and pulsed with energy, “He’s reliable. Tabe gets good information.”

Tabe absorbed another liter while the others nursed their first couple ounces. Raw tapped his foot excitedly and looked wantingly at the head pilot of Agora One.

“What?” Zay said.

Raw tilted his head, “Come on. You’re not curious to know what happened?”

“Not really.”

“Come on.”

“Ok, maybe a micron,” she relented. “So what?”

Raw suggested, “Maybe the board of Agora One would be interested in checking it out.”

“Why would they want to do that?”

“Because a lot of them are human, or at least, part human.”

Zay shook her head no emphatically and shot the rest of her tequila with gusto. “I know what you’re thinking, Raw, and the answer is no.”

“It wouldn’t hurt to ask your dad. He is on the board.”

“Even if that mattered, which it doesn’t, Agora One already has its route scheduled out for the next six months, and the trek to Earth would be at least three months.”

“Still doesn’t hurt to ask.”

“You don’t know my father,” she said tongue-in-cheek.

“But I do.”

“Not like I do.”

Chapter 2

The trade show went on for days. Delightful days, full of a flurry of market activity at breakneck speeds. It had everything one could imagine, and a little extra. From large, complex systems and inventions, to everything down to the simplest pleasure, like Frustidian fruit (a widely renowned delicacy).

Thousands of young and old, thick and thin, from dozens of different intergalactic species that comprised the greater Space Agora, gave this grand event unfettered energy.

There was one inventor, and one invention, that drew a great deal of interest and attention. It was a young inventor who had a prototype for a time gun. A TIME GUN. What was a time gun, exactly? Well, the concept went something like this. It could be set to a particular point in the past or future and pointed at a particular target. For example, you could put it on a setting for twenty years in the past and fire it at a piece of firewood. The molecules of the firewood would disappear to the casual viewer, and would re-emerge and rejoin the tree that it had come from, twenty years earlier. This is a simple example, though. What would happen if fired at a more complex object? Or, God forbid, a life form? A sentient being?

The consequences of such an act could surely be negative on a vast scale. It was with this in mind that ultimately led most individuals at the trade expo to view the timegun with a novel curiosity, but with enough skepticism and caution to write it off as undesirable. Too risky.

Dejected, the young scientist left the famed expo. Within hours, he was soon surrounded by interested parties which he, ironically, had no interest in.

His single ship and a security detail behind him were surrounded by a swarm of space pirates. One of the insect-like pirates communicated to the scientist, “We have a keen interest in your work.”

The scientist told the space pirate that he had no interest in dealing with characters such as themselves.

“You don’t have a choice in the matter,” boomed the captain of the lead pirate ship. “We’re taking your merchandise, with or without you."

Chapter 3

"Your friend, Raw, the comedian, must have been joking, right? This is some type of crude form of human humor?", Noc said with an amused candor. Zay's father, full-blooded Songardian, was pacing slowly and methodically as he spoke with his only child. His frame was typical for his species. Long and rangy, about 2.5 meters tall, with color-shifting, almost silk-like scales for skin. His sparkling eyes danced with a calm confidence and he maintained a proud posture.

Zay shook her head at the pacing, life-sized hologram of her father that was in her living room, on the second tier of her living quarters of Agora One. "It's not a joke, but I agree with you, it's out of the question."

He turned and gazed penetratingly into his daughter. "Why do you hang around with that boy, anyway?"

She cringed and put her hands on her hips as her tail swirled faster. "He's almost 30 Earth years, not exactly a boy."

His chin pointed upward and his fiery eyes narrowed, "You're not thinking of mating with this boy, are you? You're my only child, after all."

"Dad!" she screeched. Now her tail was really whipping.

"It's a perfectly legitimate question," he said stoically.

She sighed strong enough to make the hologram of her father flicker. "Anyway, I'll tell Raw that going to Earth is out of the question."

"Absolutely."

"Ok, dad, I gotta go."

Click.

Two holograms, more than 100 light years apart, flickered out. Communication ended. The father flicked his tongue rapidly and tried to refocus on his work, in an attempt to suppress his emotions. The daughter whipped her tail quickly and let her emotions pulse even more frantically through her. Why couldn't she just have a normal family? Why was she literally the only one of her kind in the universe? Sometimes she felt like a science

project gone wrong. Born in a lab, consisting of two physically incompatible species.

Chapter 4

Tequi scratched thoughtfully at his salt-and-pepper scruff and stared at his inquisitor. It was an interesting proposition, to be sure. A time consuming one, but intriguing nevertheless. “So you want to go to Earth, huh?”

Raw smirked and gazed confidently at his elder. “Yep. If Agora One won’t go, why not you? Why not me? I’d go myself, but don’t have the resources. You know that.”

Tequi chuckled. It was true. Raw’s line of work wasn’t exactly the most lucrative, in terms of gaining capital and resources, anyway. Raw, like most people, had his own space ship, but not one capable of intergalactic travel. In old Earth terms, Raw had a horse and buggy, and Tequi had a private jet. A fleet of private jets, actually, of all different types, styles, purposes, and capabilities.

Tequi straightened his cap for the hundredth time that day. “Let’s examine this, shall we? You want to go in order to gain historical knowledge and to see the possible ending of the long and sordid history of humanity on Earth.”

“Something like that.”

“So you can make more jokes.”

“No, no, no. I’m a historian, first and foremost. The only reason I do historical comedy is because it’s a more lucrative trade. More people want to laugh than to listen to lectures. So I find the darkly comedic side of things, and deliver it with no apologies.”

Tequi nodded in agreement, “And the human race on Earth gives you plenty of material in that regard, no doubt.”

Raw batted his droopy eyes and folded his paste-colored arms. “No doubt.”

“So,” Tequi continued, “What’s in it for me? I must say, going back to the original source of agave sends a tingle through me.”

It was true. No other place in the universe, at least that was known at the time, was home to a plant quite like agave.

There were similar ones on other planets, which Tequi's family had used to make their product. They had also made hybrids with the original agave seed that had been brought from Earth centuries earlier. But to have original source material would make for fantastic trade possibilities. Why hadn't Tequi or anyone else gone to Earth from the greater Space Agora in all that time? It was quite simple, really. Nobody in the Space Agora traded with individuals of reprehensible moral character, and Earth was chock full of 'em. All of the anarchists on Earth, centuries earlier, invented their way out of a hellish society, basically, and never looked back. And to all the species in the Space Agora, Earth was an afterthought, a backwards little territory not to be dealt with.

"So tempting," Tequi said as he smacked his lips. He tapped his thin fingers methodically at the sidearm on his hip. "We'll need to get a crew together that's adept at defense. Who knows what happened over there or what we'll find."

"I'll see what I can do," Raw said.

Tequi grinned. "I wasn't hinting that you should be the one to do it. I was thinking out loud, more or less."

"Gotcha. Can I make a suggestion about the crew for this endeavor?"

"Absolutely not."

"What?"

"Just kidding. Go ahead."

"Damn, you're impossible to read sometimes."

"I like to keep people guessing."

"Anyway, do you think your personal assistant, Dans, could maybe sit this one out?"

Tequi chuckled, "You don't like being hit on by a horny whirlwind of sand?"

Raw gave Tequi a cutting stare.

"Hey, I hear ya, Raw. I hear ya. Trust me, her behavior of late is making my skin crawl, to be honest, but two things here. Number one, it's only a natural phase of their species' life process, so I can't really fault her for it. Number two, her species

is very adept at defense. She can change her shape fast enough to dodge some of the fastest firepower out there. She's damn near bulletproof. On top of all that, she's extremely loyal and, if it came down to it, she'd more than likely lay her life down for me. Or you, for that matter. Most of her species are like that, don't ya know?"

"No, I wasn't aware. But why would it come to that?"

"Hell if I know why it would come to that. The thing is, though, they have the ability to swarm their."

Raw interrupted, "Wait. Yeah, I do know this. They can swarm over an adversary with all of the particles that make up their body, and smother them. And they're almost impossible to break away from. The catch is, though, that that is their last act. If they make that move, they die. Kind of like a bee."

"Kind of like a bee," Tequi agreed.

"Ok, she's in," Raw relented. He paused and admired a dark red moonlet outside. Tequi's suite, while not the swankiest on Agora One, still afforded a striking 180 degree view from its floor to ceiling windows. "Ya know what would really be helpful, would be someone who lived on Earth before and knew the terrain."

Tequi scoffed, "That would require someone that's over 500 years old, as far as I know, and I'm fairly certain that the fountain of youth has yet to be found and humans don't live that long. Correct me if I'm wrong."

"You're wrong."

"Prove it."

"You're only thinking of humans. There's still an A.I. around, one of the original space pioneers from Earth. It was there and could prove to be very helpful."

"If you can track down such a wise old sage, be my guest. Hell, if you can do that, I'll even cut your share for the cost of the trip."

"I thought my skill set more than covered my passage."

Tequi snickered and stared. Raw stared back just as hard. Tequi broke, “Oh, come on, you must be kidding. What kind of capital you sittin on?”

“You mean other than my swashbuckling, daring-do?”

Tequi groaned.

“I’ve got over a thousand Kutshockos, for starters.”

“That currency went belly-up, didn’t ya hear?”

Raw froze. “Now you must be joking. That currency was backed by an extensive mineral portfolio.”

“I wish I were joking, as I was holding a couple thousand of them myself. When word got out that old man Kutshockos had disappeared into a Dizilos drug den for months and was smoking up all his profits, there was a mad sell-off and nobody would accept it anymore. All that happened within a week. Damn shame, too.”

“What happened to the mines?”

“Oh, they’re still operating. Some of the mining operators got together and staked claim to the resources..”

They both shrugged. “That’s the market.”

“That’s the market.”

Raw continued, “Anyway, I’ve still got a couple dozen other currencies, obligations, service credits, time credits, and resource credits from a couple different galaxies, so I’m sure we can work something out.” Raw, tired of being on the spot, decided to turn the tables on his older friend, “An even more important question is, who’s gonna pilot us all that way?”

“I am, of course.”

“So you won’t be drinking, right?”

“Aw, come on, a little tequila while flying above light speed is the only way to go, in my book,” Tequi quipped.

“You know they used to have coercive regulations on Earth that prohibited people from even driving a ground vehicle after a beer.”

“Ya don’t say.” Tequi paused and thought for a moment. “But you can’t get hurt in a ground vehicle if you’re wearing a force field, so that doesn’t make any sense.”

Raw chuckled, “They didn’t have force fields back then.”

“Right.”

Raw squeezed his eyes shut for a moment while he processed the unfettered ridiculousness of Tequi.

Tequi fired back, “You think you can leave your girlfriend behind that long? We’ll be gone at least 6 months, round trip.”

“She’s busy with work, anyway. And then there’s, well,” he paused.

“Well, what?”

Raw gave a sour look and rubbed his neck. “Her father is impossible.”

“Yeah, Songardians are notorious for the ruthless and unbending protection of their offspring.”

Tequi got lost in a four-dimensional piece of art in his suite. Raw broke him from his art-induced trance, “Hey, Tequi…..Tequi!”

He looked at Raw, annoyed, “Captivating, isn’t it? Right, anyway, I’ll have to find someone to look after my affairs for a while.”

“And I’ll have to broadcast my act from your ship. And you’ll have a front row seat.”

“I’ve seen your act three times, and ya know, Raw, that’s three times too many. I’ll make sure my soundproofers are activated.”

Raw groaned. He loved and hated Tequi all at the same time.

Chapter 5

In the months that passed while zipping to Earth, here is a smattering of what happened on board Tequi's ship, as well as some highlights from the Space Agora as well.

Tequi had been tempted into some 5-tier poker, and regretted it shortly thereafter, losing a handsome sum to his cohorts, especially Raw. Raw literally patted himself on the back afterwards, having won nearly enough to pay for his round-trip passage on Tequi's vessel. Tequi found a bright side and a bit of solace in this, however, as Raw, not needing the cash, canceled his comedy shows that were planned while on board.

Tabe was putting away copious amounts of tequila, and after many requests from Tequi to slow down, finally relented, putting himself into self-induced hibernation for over a month. Raw went into stasis for a few weeks as well, mostly for his own benefit, as it was the only way he could get away from Dans's desperate romantic overtures.

Masher, a 500-year-old, Artificial Intellect, that was made of trillions of nano-particles that could be reshaped at will, also joined the group as well. It spent most of its time in the form of a colorful cloud.

Fost, a six-eyed, floating furball from Ducled, joined the adventure as well.

Masher and Fost conversed among themselves a great deal of the time, recounting stories and debating various 'what-if' scenarios, had things been different on their respective planets in the past. What if Ducled had had a warmer climate? Would Ducleds still have been furballs? Or so deeply contemplative and logical? What if humans had never made it off Earth in the first place? Or invented A.I.? They traded stories and theories contentedly, sometimes for days on end.

Masher and Raw also had some extensive exchanges regarding Earth history. Raw was endlessly curious, and Masher was over 500 years old, and was one of the first to leave Earth with the first human anarchist space pioneers. He talked about

how small groups of anarchists on Earth had first resorted to the oceans to find freedom, forming a loose society called “The Sea Agora.”

And he also told about his first best friend, nearly 500 years ago, on Earth, a young man called Setarcos. Setarcos had discovered how to safely split the dark matter and energy material that is found so commonly throughout the universe. It could only be done with Anahata, also known as heart energy particles. Not just from humans, but from any sentient life form that had a heart.

It was this technology that had powered those early anarchist pioneers into space. It not only gave a near limitless energy supply, but also enabled the acceleration device now found throughout the Space Agora, the SPEED (Stable Particle Energy Ejector Device). This allowed for interstellar travel at speeds of many thousands of times the speed of light. Speed that allowed for intergalactic travel. Speed that required a new classification, and Setarcos had come up with the measurement of KLYPH (Kilo Light Years Per Hour). The top speed during Agora One’s time was 10 KLYPH, which certainly not all ships enjoyed.

Masher also relayed to them how the first trip into space had been barely over the speed of light. This was because a velocity as high as one KLYPH would destroy any known materials on Earth, natural or man-made. So new materials had to be found and developed before crossing the Milky Way was a real possibility.

They had passed a dizzying array of celestial objects, but none that were out of the ordinary for the passengers. They’d passed two black holes, a supernova, a hyper-quasar, and countless star systems and planets. They had been approached by some passing Altaveans wanting to trade. They rejected the offer, however, due to the hurry of their trek. They had passed the universally-renowned Intergalactic Juice Bar on Hollow Star 3, much to the chagrin of Raw, who wanted desperately to make a pit-stop and get some highly acclaimed juice, which was made with fruits and veggies from over 100 planets.

Agora One had hosted a martial arts tournament. Over 200 individuals had taken part, and Zay had finished second, losing in the championship match to a full-blooded Songardian.

Shortly thereafter, Agora One had gone to Apapacho to enjoy some fun in the triple sun on that galactically-famous vacation planet.

Lastly, Zay's father Noc had received a most unwanted and secret transmission, from someone he regretted ever having dealt with in the past.

Finally, after 88 Earth days, Tequi's diamond-shaped starship "Turbo" made a slow approach to the little blue spinning marble. The diverse occupants of the craft looked at the large 3D holo-viewer in one of the roomy lounges. Tequi was on the bridge manning the craft, busy punching holo-buttons and squabbling with his ship's core A.I. over where to establish their orbit. "Tequi, I'm not parking that low."

"Why the hell not?"

"Don't be coy with me. You know why not."

"Aw, you afraid of a little space junk?"

"You call that a little? Do you want to know how many tons of.."

"No, I don't want to know how much it is. You're bulletproof, so what's the big deal if a defunct satellite accidentally gives ya a tap?"

"Easy for you to say."

"Damn semi-sentient machines."

"Oh, sure, blame it on my sentience."

Tequi threw his hands up and conceded to let the ship park itself for the moment. "Ok, Turbo, do whatever the hell ya want." He walked bitterly to the observation lounge to join the others.

Raw, amused, commented, "Your ship really needs an attitude adjustment."

Turbo cut in, "I can hear you, ya know."

"I know, that's why I said that out loud."

Tequi rubbed his neck, “Ok, let’s look at some ground images and get some readings. Turbo, please look for life signs. Also, try and find some irregularities in surface and atmospheric conditions based on a comparison with all historical data. When you find something, put in on holo-imager.”

Fost said, “You’re pretty smart for a tequila salesman.”

Tequi looked at the floating furball on the other side of the lounge. “Thanks, furball, that means a lot coming from you.”

Turbo announced, “There are too many irregularities to show, just on the surface.”

Raw and Tequi glanced at each other. “Really?” they echoed.

“Give me an example.”

“Enveloping holo or visual only?”

Tequi said, “Let’s be adventurous. Enveloping.”

Suddenly, they were surrounded by life-sized holographic projections of a proportionate size of the surface. Dans freaked out, “Oh no, not enveloping. Please, I don’t want to be surrounded by this. This is awful! What were you thinking, Tequi? I can’t stand the sight of this! How..”

Tabe chided the fast-talker, “They’re just holo-projections.”

Tequi’s jaw was nearly on the floor. “Dans, get a grip or take a hike.”

Fost said, “Fascinating. This is a first for me.”

“Are they all dead?”

“Affirmative.”

“Are there any still ticking on the planet?”

“I regret your word usage, and no, there aren’t. There are no signs of surviving A.I. on planet Earth. Or any other lower type robotics, for that matter.”

“Cause of destruction?”

“It appears that most of them were destroyed due to massive electrical overload. They were fried to death, basically.”

“Fascinating,” Fost repeated.

Tabe scoffed, “I personally don’t find mass extinction fascinating.”

“Is it extinction if they’re just machines?”

“Watch your tongue,” Turbo said harshly. It continued, “They weren’t all destroyed by overload, however. It appears that some of them died in battle.”

“Battle?”

“With each other.”

“Ok, let’s move on to the next irregularity, please.”

An ancient pyramid, speckled with white and a snow-capped apex appeared before them.

“Oh, my,” Masher exclaimed.

“What is it, Masher?”

“That pyramid is, er, was, in one of the hottest, dryest climates on Earth. That’s the Giza Pyramid in Egypt, is it not?”

Turbo confirmed, “Yep, that’s the one, and now it’s freezing. There are remains of what appears to be a fairly extensive weather control system, most of which is outdated by hundreds of years.”

“Yes,” Masher continued. “When I was there in the 21st century, A.I. controlled governments were manipulating the weather to a large extent.”

Raw paced around, eyes fixed on the frozen pyramid, “And so those outdated systems finally went awry, and this is what remains?”

“That is part of what happened, it is nearly certain. However, simple environmental catastrophes cannot account for the extent of the damage.”

Tequi said slowly, “Ok, here’s the big question. Are there any humans alive?”

“There are two humans alive on Earth.”

“Only two?”

“99 percent certainty there are only two, based on all current data.”

“Where?”

“In a subterranean structure in the western mountains of the continent formerly known as North America.”

Raw’s eyes got huge. “Let’s go!”

“Hold on now, just a minute. Let’s think this through. They could be hostile, and they’ll definitely have skewed morals, based on what we know of the previous society.”

“True. And we can’t all go down to the surface. Don’t wanna have all our eggs in one basket, so to speak. Gotta have someone watching the ship, too.”

“I’m perfectly capable of taking care of myself.”

“Dans, how about you stay here on board? You’re the most familiar with the ship and have great self-defense skills.”

“Oh, why thank you. You’re really so kind, Tequi. I’m honored that you have so much confidence in me to..”

Tequi cut off Dans ramblings, “Any objections to Dans staying behind and guarding the ship?”

All agreed enthusiastically. Anything to avoid listening to more rambling. Tequi continued, “Ok, I’ve got a dozen solo pods in the away bay.”

“Away bay?”

“Yeah, basically a cargo-slash-docking bay, but with a snazzier title.”

Raw grimaced, “Sure...snazzy.”

Masher asked, “What kind of supplies do you propose we bring?”

“Each pod has basic food supplies to last for three days, plus a med kit, backup communicators, and some firepower. I assume everyone has their armor, right?”

All nodded except for Masher and Tabe. Masher, being a shape-shifting entity, was more than capable of dodging bullets, among other things. Tabe was naturally bulletproof due to his dense, metallic anatomy.

“And everyone knows how to fly a basic interplanetary pod?”

Raw looked at the floor and shuffled his feet. Tequi giggled and showed teeth, “Your girlfriend hasn’t taught you how to fly?”

Turbo spoke up, “Hey, you don’t want me to guide all the pods down myself?”

Tequi laughed, “Now where’s the fun in that?”

Raw looked at him sourly. Tequi sighed, “Oh, all right, you bring us down remotely, Turbo. We’ll have some mercy on the comedian here.” He paused and took a quick glance around the room at his companions. “Ok, let’s be on our way.”

“Wait a sec,” Fost said. “What’s our objective in going down there? What do we do if we meet up with these last two Earth humans?”

“Figure out what the hell happened.”

Chapter 6

A small fleet of pods, each one about ten feet in diameter, with an opaque appearance to any outside viewer, had just broken through the atmosphere. They were now soaring and descending gracefully, under Turbo's guidance, with basic anti-gravitic propulsion, through a collage of fluffy white. Once through this layer of sky, some of the aftermath on the surface began to come into focus.

A shiny seacoast brushed against soaring peaks. Raw took note, and was fairly certain that this was not normal in recent Earth history. The Pacific Ocean was not supposed to be touching the Rocky Mountains in this central land mass. He called to Masher over the comms, "Masher, what did this place used to be called?"

"Colorado," it announced.

As they got closer to the surface, they could see trees had been uprooted and tossed around like twigs. Boulders sat on crushed bodies. Some artificial structures sat topsy-turvy. One of them was what appeared to be a giant statue of a life form, a monument of some sort. It was sitting on its head, with murky water taunting its edges. Various parts were strewn about the landscape. They appeared to be parts of what were formerly vehicles of some sort. Aerial vehicles, perhaps, based on the shapes and sizes.

WHACK!

They made a rather rough landing on a damp, rocky surface at the foot of an enormous mountain. Well, enormous by Earth standards. Some mountains on Altavea had peaks over 50,000 meters. This one stood around 4,000 meters.

They crawled out of the pods. Tequi scolded his ship, "As precise as you machines think you are, that's the softest landing you could pull off?"

"Do it yourself next time, gramps."

Tequi brushed it off, rubbed his back, and slowly swiveled his head to look at his surroundings. “So where are these two survivors supposed to be at?”

“About 500 meters up, there’s a small ridge that juts out. Once you get to the ridge, there are metallic doors built into the rock.”

Tequi and Raw both squinted upwards and tried to see the area referred to. Masher, Tabe, and Fost floated up steadily in search of the artificial opening. The heavy metallic doors lay slanted in the side of the mountain. Fost called down to the others, “They appear to be made of a primitive substance called steel.”

Tequi and Raw eyed the slope before them. It wasn’t the worst terrain to hike up, but it wasn’t the most endearing, either. Things were still soggy and slick from whatever torrents of aquatic chaos had fallen recently. The grade was steep enough to be a bit daunting. “Wanna use anti-g lifts?” Tequi asked.

“Where’s the fun in that?” Raw said playfully. They started lunging upwards.

About a hundred meters up, they heard a rumbling noise. Tequi looked up and left, then right, then left again, and there it was. A house-sized boulder rumbling down the side of the mountain directly for them, and only seconds away. Tequi and Raw split apart, diving left and right. Just before the crushing gift from on high met their path, Tabe shot down and annihilated it with a fantastic, explosive jolt in the boulder’s core. The force broke it into a fountain of airborne fragments just before it reached the flailing humans.

Tequi law sprawled out, holding onto a tough little shrub for dear life, and slowly pulled himself up. He groaned and picked up his cowboy hat, which now donned mud stains on the brim. He looked skyward and yelled sarcastically to Turbo, “Thanks for the warning!”

He and Raw then gave a sincere thanks to Tabe. As they continued up, Masher announced a new finding. “That wasn’t a random boulder. Somebody doesn’t want us here.”

"Aw, I see, that was the welcoming committee."

"Hold on a sec, let's look at this from the moral perspective. If they've sealed themselves inside a hollowed out mountain, aren't we aggressing by entering? Especially after they've just made it very clear that we're not welcome?"

They all pondered the question for a moment, then Tequi offered his thoughts, "Well, let's look at some other details of the situation. They're the last two people on Earth. They just survived what were obviously unspeakable catastrophes. They probably faced an untold number of bandits in the past few months, and are scared shitless, hence their paranoid and aggressive actions on our approach. We should at least talk to them, let them know that we're here to help. I don't suppose there's an intercom system or doorbell on that steel door, is there, Masher?"

"Negative."

Fost suggested, "I could communicate with them telepathically."

Raw chuckled, "Yeah, I'm sure that wouldn't freak them out. We don't even know if they've ever seen an extraterrestrial, let alone had a voice put in their heads by one."

Tabe mocked Fost, "So much for your superior intellect."

Fost turned an annoyed eye at Tabe and fluffed out his fur to show angst.

Tequi asked, "Hey Masher, how is that door controlled?"

"By brute force. All electronics were fried here, remember?"

Raw commented playfully, "Hence the stone weaponry."

Tequi said, "Well, let's finish the hike up while we think about it."

They carefully navigated the rugged terrain and soon reached the ridge with the others. Tabe made a sly eye on one side of his smooth, steely complexion and said, "I think I've got a solution to our present dilemma regarding entry."

"I'm all ears."

Tabe smashed through the steel doors like they were paper and exclaimed, “Ooops, how clumsy of me.”

They all shrugged it off and followed behind, except for Fost. Inside the structure, they found themselves staring into a pitch black tunnel. Masher illuminated itself and put a glow onto their surroundings. They were in a metallic tube walkway. As they progressed down its slight slope, frayed and busted electronics littered their path. Mystery liquids appeared randomly as well. After a few minutes, they came to a crossroads of sorts. At the crossroads were three paths. One up, one left, and one right. They also came to a charred console, which they assumed had formerly served as some sort of control panel. Peering upwards to see where the higher path went, they could see what appeared to be a lift of some sort, one that had seen much better days.

Raw looked anxiously upwards, then over to Tequi, “Where to now? Should we split up?”

“I think up is out of the question,” Tequi answered.

“Not necessarily,” Masher said. It turned to Tabe, “You shouldn’t have any trouble navigating up through that broken lift, should you?”

“I’ve broken tougher things in my sleep.”

Tequi said cautiously, “Your offer is appreciated, Tabe, but perhaps we shouldn’t break any more than necessary.”

All agreed. “What’s the wise old ship from above have to say? Can you see exactly where the life forms are?”

“They’re too deep to get a proper reading. They’re definitely not up. I recommend going down.”

“There is no down. Only left or right.”

Tequi slowly took a macro view of his surroundings and suggested, “Let’s split up. One group left, one group right. Masher, you go left with Raw. Tabe, you’re with me. How about it?”

They agreed and went separate ways. Within seconds, there was a shriek from the left. Everyone turned and was startled

to see that Raw had disappeared. Raw announced, “Surprise! Looks like there is a down!”

“Should we follow him?” Tabe asked.

“Nah, just leave him and get on with our lives,” Tequi said sarcastically. “Of course we’ll follow him!”

Masher went in first and illuminated the chute. Upon reaching the bottom, a gigantic fishnet was there and nearby was a relieved Raw. “Oh, good, you’re not hurt,” Masher said dryly. Masher called up to the others and gave them a brief assessment of the situation, along with the go-ahead to come down.

Moments later, Tequi came tumbling down, holding only his trusty cowboy hat for dear life. He plopped down into the fish net and bounced around for a bit until coming to an awkward halt, his body tangled in the webbing of the net. Tabe came next, rumbling down quite loudly.

Upon illuminating their surroundings, they were astounded by what they saw. High overhead and surrounding them was what appeared to be an abandoned stadium area of some sort. There was staggered seating around the perimeter, carved out of solid rock and smoothed down to the finest degree. There were contortion bars hanging around at various heights, along with a rainbow colored array of streamers, banners, and other artful tapestries. It was as if an art supply store had exploded and the remains had settled into a bizarre collage of dangling exhibitions. Even more bizarre was a variety of cages hanging at various heights, top to bottom. Lights also hung in grand lines that spanned the entire underground stadium. None of them were lit because of the lack of power. Mirrors of different shapes and sizes were also scattered at various heights. Some lay broken on the stone floor. A great number of dead holo-emitters were also ubiquitous throughout it all.

“Well, not exactly what I was expecting,” Tequi said as he gawked around.

“I didn’t come all this way to find a circus,” Raw quipped.

Tequi said, “Why not? Seems about right for you, Raw.”

Tabe floated near an archway on the other side of the underground stadium. “Who’s up for another tunnel? Raw, wanna go first again?”

“Very funny, and no.”

Masher volunteered, as it was the best suited to survival in a larger variety of conditions. It entered the tunnel and after zipping along for a few moments, it came to another vaulted opening. This time, however, there was a multitude of smaller, bubble-like structures together, resembling a beehive. Masher, being an A.I., had advanced hearing capabilities and sensed something in the upper reaches of the hive. Not wanting to alarm whoever or whatever it was, Masher sent a message in silence to Turbo, which then communicated with the others about the situation. They all decided to enter.

When they got to the hive, they looked around, fascinated. “Must’ve housed at least a few thousand down here.”

“And who knows how many more tunnels there are.”

Click-clack.

An echo rang through the cavernous chamber.

“What the hell are you doing here?” an angry, male voice called towards them.

Heads, eyes, and particles bobbed up and down and around in search of the source of the voice. Masher spotted him first. It was a man in his mid-30s, slim and fairly muscular, with long, wild hair and a sour face. He was pointing a cartoonishly large black sniper rifle at the group.

Tequi looked around at his fellow travelers. Everyone was staring curiously at the human three stories above them. All of them were wearing invisible, force field armor, so the weapon pointing at them was inconsequential. This allowed them to relax and study the character before them. Who was he? How did he survive? Why was he down here in this godforsaken place in the middle of a mountain?

Tequi tipped his cap and yelled, “We’re here looking for survivors and to see what the hell happened to our old planet!”

"Who sent you?" came another voice, strong and female, from the opposite side of the hive. They turned to see a well-built female, also mid-30s, bronze skin, with impossibly wild and dark, long hair also pointing a rifle at them.

"We came on our own accord. Nobody sent us," Tequi explained.

"By the way, we know that your weapons are useless, cuz of whatever electrical calamity happened a while back. Just so ya know."

The male smirked, "It fires lead."

Tequi and Raw glanced at each other with astounded amusement. Lead bullets? Talk about ancient history.

"Didn't know those still existed!"

"I rigged it myself, and it works marvelously. Wanna see?"

"That won't be necessary."

An obnoxiously loud bang rang through the chamber. Lead popped off the stone wall far behind the group. "We don't have anything to give you. We advise you to leave at once."

Tequi explained, "We respect and honor private property and have no ideas to take anything from you. We're human, but we're not from here. We could maybe help you, if you're open to the idea. If you want us to leave, though, just say the word and we'll be on our way, along with our sincere apologies for trespassing."

The male and female looked each other in the eye for a moment, then both refocused their aim through the scopes of their weaponry. The female yelled this time, "How could you possibly help us? Nobody helps anyone else. Not in my lifetime, anyway."

The male yelled down, "Where are you from? Who sent you? Are there more of you coming? And what the hell are those things? They're not human, that's for sure."

"I'm an A.I."

"A stable A.I.? Not possible."

Tequi and Raw looked at Masher, perplexed. What did they mean by that?

"It's an A.I., I can assure you."

"I'm Tabe."

"He's from another planet."

"I can speak for myself."

"Look, there are no others. Ok, there's two more from our crew, but that's it, and they're not coming down here. Do you mean others here on Earth?"

"What else could I possibly mean? Of course, here on Earth. I know no other place."

"That's unfortunate," Raw said reflexively.

Tequi elbowed him in the ribs. "There are no survivors here on Earth. You're the only two here."

"Lies. How could you possibly know that?"

"We have machines that can sense such things. It's true. You're the last two humans here on Earth. We can give you food and water, if you want. We're curious to know what exactly happened here."

Noticing the pistol on Tequi's hip, the male yelled down, "You come armed but haven't drawn your weapon. Why?"

Tabe boomed, "Your weapons can't hurt us."

"Is that right?" the female said as she came a hair away from squeezing the trigger. "How about we test that theory?"

Crickets.

"No volunteers?"

"Ok, go head. Shoot me," Raw said. He folded his arms in mock defiance.

Boom-pop-ouch!

Raw grabbed his shoulder. No blood. "Aw, that stung a little. That's not supposed to happen."

"Must be some interference being so deep in a mountain, not to mention the lingering electrical instabilities. I'm not running in top condition myself," Masher said.

"You're telling me this now?"

Raw looked up at his attacker, "Anyway, see, no blood, I'm fine. How about lunch?"

The would-be snipers gave surprised glances to each other from across the way. They slowly held their rifles down. The female spoke, “Humans that are bulletproof?”

Masher quipped, “Please, no need to flatter them so much.”

The male glared at Masher. “We’ll talk, but on one condition.”

“Go ahead.”

“The A.I. isn’t present. We have a healthy distrust of them.”

Palpable tension flowed through the room. Raw tried to ease the tension, “But the alien can stay?”

“We’d prefer if it”

“He.”

“He weren’t present either.”

Tequi said, “Our friend Masher here can leave, if you insist, but in the best interests of our conversation, it would be in the interest of everyone to have it around.”

“How so?”

“Masher, our A.I. friend here, lived on Earth over 500 years ago. It knows more about human life on Earth than we do.”

The last two humans on Earth nodded slowly. The male agreed to come down with the others, while the female would keep her distance and listen from above, at least until she felt comfortable being closer to the strangers.

The male appeared at the base of one of the honeycomb-like entrances. He approached the group slowly and stopped about five meters shy of them.

“First things first,” Tequi began with a friendly tone. “What’s your name?”

“I’m Evol.”

Tequi motioned upwards, “And her?”

“She is called Meago.”

Tequi, Raw, Masher, and Tabe introduced themselves. Evol was noticeably uneasy by Masher’s presence. His eye kept

shifting towards Masher more than the others. His gaze changed when he looked at Tabe. He became relaxed and curious.

"Hungry?" Raw asked.

"We are always hungry."

"I've got food in my bag if you're interested."

Evol nodded. Raw got into his backpack and pulled out a few nutri-squares.

Evol looked at it disapprovingly. "You call this food?"

"Well, normally we eat foods that you might be more accustomed to, I suppose. But considering we just wanted to pack light for our little trip down here, we just brought some simple foods."

Raw opened one of the squares and took a healthy bite. "They're good. Lots of nutrients. Made from plants from two different planets."

Evol cautiously took a square and nibbled a bit. His face showed pleasure, and his guests imagined that he hadn't eaten in quite some time.

"You say that Meago and I are the last two humans on Earth."

"That much is certain," Tabe said as it hovered higher to examine the surrounding structure closer.

"What about A.I.? Are there any of them left?"

"Not functioning," Tequi said. "If you don't mind me asking, I'm very curious to know why you seem so fearful of artificial intellects?"

Evol's face slowly produced a devilish grin and his eyes became wild. He peered up to Meago and yelled, "They want to know why we don't like A.I.!"

Meago's face became unbearably sour and she let out a painful groan involuntarily.

Evol turned to face Tequi and looked him square in the eye. "Do the words 'slavery' and 'bloodshed' mean anything to you?"

Tequi and Raw gasped slightly under their breath and nodded sadly. An image of the cages they'd passed earlier flashed through Tequi's mind.

"Please go on," Raw said.

"People have been nothing more than toys of amusement to the machine class for as long as we know."

"What type of amusement?"

"Artistic, sexual, musical. Any type of act that was prone to evoke passion and emotion."

The visitors were now truly puzzled. How could a machine that lacked emotions be so interested in such things? It didn't make any sense.

Raw spoke with a confused tone, "But A.I. don't have emotions, so I don't understand why they would seek that out, and in such an aggressive fashion."

Now the confusion went to Evol's face. Meago came slowly from behind and joined them, taking a place next to her fellow survivor. Evol spoke in an angry tone and twisted his face, "Since when do machines not have emotions, and wildly erratic ones at that?"

"News to me," Tequi said. "Where we come from, machines don't have emotional capabilities."

Meago tossed her hair back defiantly and took a deep breath, "Well I don't know where you come from, but here on Earth, A.I. have emotions, and with the most terrible consequences that you could possibly imagine."

Evol threw a hand in the air and waved towards the hive behind them. "Do you know what that is?"

"A dwelling of some sort."

"Yes, that's where we were kept, living on top of each other, like animals. Bred and kept in tiny cages like that, like animals. And when the masters called, we went to the showroom and performed our duties."

They thought of the hanging cages, stadium seating, and elaborate explosion of colors they'd passed through earlier. Now

the ugly reality of what they'd come across was coming into focus.

Masher, floating and waving as far away as it could, near the entrance to the tunnel they'd come from, interjected, "I might be able to shed some light on the subject."

Tequi assured their hosts that Masher was completely harmless and had lived in peace with humans and dozens of other species for centuries. They relented, albeit reluctantly.

"When I left Earth, nearly 500 years ago, some government gangs were almost completely controlled by machine intellects. Some of that ruling class, though, was prone to experimenting with a new substance called EMOS. It was a synthetic emotion imitator for A.I. It was forbidden for some time, but that didn't last long. When I left Earth, EMO experimentation was in full swing in the A.I. government sector, with full integration and normal emotional capabilities as their goal."

Raw and Tequi were alarmed. This was a bit of history that they certainly were not privy to.

"Experiment failed," Tequi said grimly.

Masher continued, "In my time here, they were never able to master the effects. From what you've told me, and what I've seen here, it seems that the consequences were unspeakably disastrous."

"It worked both ways, too," Meago said sharply, with a scowl to match.

"What do you mean?"

"Some humans tried to incorporate machine parts into their bodies, and also failed to master the effects."

"Cyborgs."

"Yes, they felt superior and it went to their heads, to their ego. They became megalomaniacs, violent, and tyrannical."

Tequi asked sadly, "The biggest question on my mind is, what happened to cause all A.I. to die, and nearly all humans as well, here on Earth?"

"You're the ones telling us that we're the last two. You don't know?"

"Well, not a complete picture, that's for sure. All we know is there were some type of environmental catastrophes, due to malfunctions in the weather control systems. We know there were unfathomably strong electrical storms, which knocked out all electrical devices planetwide. We also know that there were severe tectonic shifts and water storms and surges that changed the land surface area of the planet. Other than that, we don't know any details. We'd like to hear your perspective about what happened, if you'd be inclined to share that with us. Maybe between our shared insights, we can piece together a more complete picture of what happened."

"We've lived here our entire lives, underground, in this human hive. It's hard to say exactly when, because all of our time keeping was electronic, but many months ago the calamities started. We were on a sun mission."

"Excuse me, what's that?"

Meago explained, "We were allowed outside for various intervals, according to the calculations of the machines, in order to receive sunlight. They decided how long of time and how much sunlight we needed. On one of these excursions, as we came through the forest that used to be near here, the sky became a fantastic, surrealistic light show. Fabulous electric bolts raged chaotically in all directions, raining mercilessly down from a strangely illuminated charcoal sky. We ran and ran as fast and hard as we could, desperately attempting to retreat back underground. The forest became a blaze in our midst. Many of our fellow slaves were struck down by mighty bolts from above. Many of our machine masters were fried and terminated as well. And that was just the first day, before the torrents even started."

"Torrents?"

"Yes, torrents of wind and rain came for weeks without fail."

Raw was amazed. "Wait, hold on. So you two made it back underground, but how about others?"

"Yes, a few dozen others survived and made it underground. A couple of machines made it, too."

"So how did the two of you end up being alone?"

"The machines, already half-mad even before the calamities, went completely psycho after the electrical storms. They turned on each other and fought to the death."

"They killed each other?"

"Simultaneously. It was a sight to behold, to say the least."

"I imagine. How did A.I. survive electrical storms?"

Masher explained, "Some of our kind are built to withstand greater power surges than are others."

"Correct me if I'm wrong, but the surviving A.I. wouldn't have had a power source, is that right?"

"From all available information, it seems that any electrical supplies were compromised. However, it's possible that many of them had quite an extensive power reserve individually."

"They could have had internal power generation too, right?"

"Not likely. It seems that the technology here hasn't changed much in the past 500 years. When I left Earth, their power was wirelessly shared on a planet-wide grid."

"Centralized."

"Exactly."

"Which left them vulnerable."

"Then it seems logical to conclude that any A.I. that remained after the calamity, that presumably had extended internal power reserves, died fighting each other. This seems especially likely, based on what we know of their attempt at synthetic emotion integration, and the madness it caused."

Raw's face was shocked. "That must've been wild. Ok, so there are no hostile A.I. here, as far as we know. So what about the other humans?"

"Well, things were relatively stable while the food supplies lasted. But after a few weeks, food ran out, and…."

"People turned on each other."

Both nodded solemnly.

"You couldn't get food outside?"

"Number one, with the ongoing chaotic weather, there was almost no food to be had outside. Number two, for generations we'd been dependent on machines to take care of us."

"Death by domestication."

Both scowled.

"I didn't mean anything negative, personally, by that. It's the truth. If you lose your ability to take care of yourself, then it's quite easy to be compromised."

"Fair enough. And I see your point. We learned, though. After the torrents stopped, we went back outside and found a way to survive. We've been living off of whatever was left of nature for months now."

"And set up defense systems, as we found out from the boulder you kindly unleashed on us."

"Yeah, how did you see us coming, by the way, if all electronic surveillance is out?"

"There's another entrance into the mountain, higher up. We keep a regular lookout because we've suffered some attacks from some desperate outsiders."

"Well, it appears that you've killed off the last so-called 'outsider', at least here on Earth."

They were interrupted by Turbo rather hastily, "Hate to cut in like this, but I thought you might like to know that there is some seismic activity brewing in your area."

"You've still been having earthquakes?"

"Every day. Where did that voice come from?"

"That was the ship."

"The ship?"

"Yeah, a spaceship. Like we said earlier, we came a long way to investigate what happened here."

"You travel off planet?" They looked at each other with shock and awe. "We didn't know that was possible."

Raw sighed, “Time has stood still for you, it would seem, for the past 500 years. The first humans left Earth about 500 years ago.”

Masher interrupted, “With the help of A.I., I might add. Myself included.”

“We didn’t know this about our history.”

“Yeah, your knowledge of such history was not in the interest of the ones that ruled over you. They kept you in the dark to make it easier to control you. That’s how slavery always works. A knowledge gap is used to create a power gap.”

“Why didn’t the A.I. go off planet if they had this technology?”

Masher explained, “They didn’t have the technology. We kept it secret, left Earth, and never looked back.”

“Until now.”

“Right.”

The world suddenly started wobbling slowly around them. Rock fragments rained down briefly. The visiting bipeds lost their balance and hit the deck, while their hosts, already accustomed to daily quakes, rolled in harmony with the Earth below. Tabe floated and was amused by how easily Tequi and Raw had flopped over like a house of cards. It was over in seconds. Tequi and Raw got up and dusted themselves off.

“I’m not so sure about the soundness of this structure. It might not last much longer if this keeps up.”

“It’s sounder than your footing,” Tabe quipped.

“I won’t argue that point,” Tequi relented playfully. “So as I see it, Meago and Evol, you’ve got two options at the moment. You can either stay here and try to repopulate the Earth.”

They looked at the space cowboy incredulously.

“Why the sour faces?”

“We’re brother and sister,” Evol said harshly.

“I see. Ok then, you’ll probably prefer option two. You come with us.”

Meago and Evol looked at each other. It was apparent that they were open to the idea, especially considering the alternative.

Raw's face ballooned and he grabbed Tequi by the arm, "Could I have a word with you, please?"

"Go ahead."

"In private."

"I didn't bring any soundproofing."

"Can Turbo do it remotely?"

"Nope."

"Piece of junk."

"I heard that!"

"Just kidding!"

Raw looked at Meago and Evol, "Excuse us for just one moment."

Tequi and Raw walked a few paces away. Raw whispered, "Are you sure bringing them is a good idea?"

"I don't see why not."

"They come from an extremely immoral and evil culture and way of life. They most certainly don't know the difference between right and wrong."

"That much is certain, but they can learn, ya know."

"And where will we take them, anyway?"

"We're going back to Agora One. They can stay there for a while, if they want."

"You're gonna foot the bill?"

"If I have to, for a bit, until they get situated. We're getting ahead of ourselves. If it'll make you feel better, go ahead and ask them to tell us the difference between right and wrong. Worst case scenario, we get some comic relief."

"Ignorance is not comic."

"Then how do you explain your line of work, Raw? Get a grip."

They went back to the group. Tequi asked, "So what do ya say? Wanna get off this battered rock?"

"What would we do out there?"

"Anything you want that's moral."

This drew blank expressions from Evol and Meago. Recognizing this, Tequi decided to test their moral compass with a simple question. “Could either of you please tell me what external government is?”

Evol crossed his arms and gave a strange look at the visitors. “That’s very simple. Government is the ruling class, those who make decisions on how to organize society.”

Meago said, “Why such a question? I don’t understand. What does this have to do with us leaving with you or not?”

Tequi and Raw looked at each other uncomfortably. It was far from the answer and reaction they were hoping for. Then again, what could they honestly expect from two humans that had known nothing but authoritarian hell all their lives? Still, it was the general custom of all those in the greater Space Agora to only interact with those who knew what Natural Law was and lived in harmony with it. Taking these two to Agora One would gain some especially unwanted attention and criticism from a multitude of people. What if they were brought on board Agora One and wreaked havoc? Of course, on the flip side of that, how much harm could two primitives like these, who had literally been using rocks as weapons within the past hour, actually cause? Finally, they would have at least 3 months travel before they would encounter Agora One, plenty of time to help educate their guests.

“The answer we were looking for,” Tequi began, “was ‘slavery’ or ‘mind control’. That’s what external government is.”

Suddenly, another tremor jolted them and jagged debris fell from above. A couple of bubble dwellings in the hive fractured as well. Then the artificial cavern once again became eerily silent as the dust settled.

Masher informed them urgently, “I’ve been doing some analysis in conjunction with Turbo. The structure we’re in is not sound and there are signs that seismic activity will increase within the coming hours. We should leave immediately.”

“Time to move on,” Tequi said. Raw and Tabe agreed. Tequi looked at Meago and Evol. “Are you coming?”

Before they could answer, the cavern started trembling violently again. This time it was far more powerful, and larger fragments came showering down. Tequi and Raw were shielded from harm by their force field armor, as was Masher. Tabe was naturally impervious to most hard objects. Meago and Evol, however, were in their naturally fragile human state. A small jagged stone caught Meago in the head, knocking her to the ground. Two other fragments caught her in the back. Evol rushed to cover her. Just as he did, the chaos stopped.

Tequi and Raw came to their side. Raw started digging quickly through his bag, searching for his med kit. Tequi pulled his med kit out from a well-organized black bag of his own. Masher hovered nearby and analyzed the injuries. “She’ll be fine. Mild concussion and some bruises on her back.”

Tequi pulled out a little silver device that vaguely resembled a pistol. He pressed a little green button and various holo-controls popped out of the device. His thin fingers flew over the controls, and then they disappeared in a flash. A blue beam shot out of the device and onto the back of Meago’s head, shining almost effervescently off her thick mane of hair.

“What are you doing?” Evol said, almost in a panic.

“Healing her head and waking her up. We gotta move. Well, ya don’t have to, but do you really want to stay here and wait to get knocked off by nature?”

Meago slowly opened her hazelnut eyes and unleashed a heart-melting smile. Tequi turned off the beam and said, “There, that smile says it all. Good as new.”

“What happened?” she said groggily.

“We’ll explain on the way,” Raw said as he and Evol helped her to her feet. “Masher, are you powerful enough to shield both of them?”

“Yes, of course. I’m not that old, ya know.”

Meago scowled sharply, “I don’t want that thing touching me!”

Raw shrugged, “If you want to risk your life, that’s your business.”

They headed back the way they came. Tequi called for Turbo, “Hey, can you send two more pods down to our location?”

“I’m busy playing Pong right now, but I’ll get to it shortly.”

“Now’s not a good time for ancient video game jokes.”

“Is it ever?”

As they crossed through the slowly crumbling stadium of sadism, Raw and Tequi were both tempted to ask about the details of what occurred there, but thought better of it, considering the circumstances. Broken glass littered the premises, fresh from more mirrors shattering.

They reached the chute that they’d come through earlier, so there was nowhere to go but up. Tabe went up first, gracefully floating his way. Tequi and Raw pulled anti-gravity discs from their bags and stuck them on their shoes, while Meago and Evol started pulling loose stones apart a few meters away, as if looking for something.

“Digging for gold?” Raw quipped.

Evol pulled a jumble of lines and hooks from under the rocks. “We keep our climbing gear hidden.”

Tequi and Raw tried not to laugh. Tequi pulled his backup anti-g discs from his bag and tossed them down to them. “Stick those on the bottom of your feet, and I’ll set them to sync your pace with us.”

“What are these?”

“Anti-gravity gadgets. They’ll float you up to the top a lot easier than climbing a rope will.”

They stuck the discs to the bottoms of their feet and instantly started floating up the chute, towards Tequi and Raw, who shot upwards once again as well. Meago and Evol gasped and screamed a little, but much less than expected.

Just as they were about to reach the top of the chute, the strongest quake of the day struck mercilessly. Masher was in front of Tequi and Raw, and quickly darted down to safeguard Meago and Evol from the impending rock cluster that was coming their way. Masher put a protective invisible shielding around

them. Tequi shifted the function of the discs so they would float a few inches above ground, but be able to run. Basically, it enabled them to run on air.

Meago and Evol screamed with dissatisfaction at being in contact with Masher. Raw stopped, looked back, and yelled, “It’s saving your life! Now shutup and run!”

The tunnel was crumpling and giving way quickly to the forces from below. Metal and rock came from an impossible number of directions as things collapsed. Dozens of pieces bounced off of the force fields. Tabe came to the double metal doors at the end of the tunnel and smashed through them, revealing a hazy and faint light of sunset from outside. The others came to the light just in time, and dove into it, just as the tunnel finally collapsed onto itself. A few seconds later, and they would have been trapped, force fields be damned.

The quaking stopped. Tequi gave a quick warning and deactivated the anti-g discs. Their feet dropped to the rocky terrain. On the horizon, lightning flashed and popped. Masher analyzed their immediate perimeter to make sure their were no rogue boulders coming their way. Once assured that they were in relative safety for a moment, it deactivated the force field surrounding the two natives. Fost swooped down from behind them, startling Meago and Evol.

Tequi asked, “What, you’ve never seen a six-eyed, flying furball before?”

Raw said, “If you’re coming with us, I suggest you get used to A.I. and aliens, cuz they’re the vast majority where we’re going.”

The pods came to meet them, surrounding them on the ridge. Tequi looked at them hurriedly, “You coming or not? Your choice.”

Meago and Evol looked at the pods uneasily.

“If you wanna go, just hop in. Our ship in orbit will fly them up, and we’ll be on our way.”

The natives nodded to each other, gulped air, and hopped into their escape pods. The pods closed automatically and

ascended slowly at first, then progressively accelerated itself through the changing atmosphere. The others did the same, and within minutes they were landed safely in the away bay of Tequi's ship.

Chapter 7

Here are some key and entertaining events that happened on the trek back towards Agora One.

Tequi lamented the fact that he hadn't been able to get any original source agave plants or seeds from Earth. A week into the journey, Turbo showed Tequi an agave plant that had miraculously survived the tumult. Turbo had sent a drone down to retrieve it, had cared for it, and made sure it was nearly certain that the plant would survive before revealing the surprise to its longtime partner and pilot, Tequi. Tequi was shocked, cried, and thanked Turbo profusely, while also expressing surprise at such a caring endeavor, for he thought that Turbo wasn't overly fond of him, to say the least.

Tabe had a clumsy accident, knocking out one of the water generators. He fixed it with Fost's help and hoped that Tequi wouldn't find out. Turbo informed Tequi and he teased Tabe mercilessly for two days about his inherent clumsiness.

There were multiple rounds of target practice at Tabe, who took pride in withstanding regular onslaughts of firepower. Sometimes he would demonstrate some aerial shiftiness and dodge many of the shots, much to the chagrin of the shooters.

They introduced the newcomers to the wonders of things that didn't exist on Earth, such as tequila, coffee, 5-tier blackjack, and a wondrous assortment of gadgets and gizmos. They were not shown too many technical aspects of space travel or higher technology in general, so as not to overwhelm them.

Raw spoke weekly with Zay and, on one of those occasions, Tequi joined them and related his plan of bringing the two Earth survivors aboard Agora One. Zay wasn't pleased with the prospect, but considering she could do nothing to prevent it, didn't protest. The only way to keep them off the ship was if all property owners decided not to rent to them. As Tequi was staking his reputation on these two strangers, it was an impossibility that every property owner on Agora One would

reject them. Not even the Board of Directors could deny someone entry. All they could do would be to offer information saying that all property owners beware of a prospective client, and for what reasons, and recommend that it would be in their interest not to associate with them. This only happened in cases of known criminals, and this was rare, as most species with a high degree of criminality (immorality) among their population rarely made it off planet, let alone intergalactic. The bottom line reason for this was that those who live in opposition to Natural Law make very little progress and often die off while robbing and fighting each other. Actions and consequences, ad infinitum.

Meago and Evol also related to them how life was on Earth. They were brother and sister, and had been produced in a laboratory, as all humans had been on Earth for over one hundred years. It was a more efficient, more logical, and therefore better way to live, according to the machines.

Each person's daily routine was dependent on their function for the machines. The majority of their functions were artistic in nature, things which the machines could not do. A.I. could not create spontaneously or invent. So the machines bred humans to do these things for them. Each human was trained by their predecessors in the basics of their trade. There were musicians, writers, painters, holo-sculptors, gladiators, and digital matrix game designers. Then there were those especially bred for the sensual arts. Others were kept as instruments of what Meago referred to as "the sadistic arts". People were beaten and tortured in a variety of unthinkable ways, all for the sadistic pleasure of the machines. This was one of the functions of some of the cages that had been hanging in the stadium, for displays of physical encounters, both the grotesque barbarity of sadistic torture, and also bizarre sex shows.

Meago had been involved in the "sadistic arts", while her brother had been a holo-sculptor. The A.I. on Earth were all addicted to synthetic emotions, called "EMOS". Meago and Evol didn't know exactly how they were produced, but they did know that each human had tissue samples taken daily from every body

part. They also witnessed, openly, how A.I. would “inject” themselves with their synthetic pleasure.

Masher had been present on Earth when EMOS were first created and gave some details about them. These were made by taking nanoparticles of various human electrochemical compounds that were produced during a variety of emotions. The particles, having an electrical component in nature, were modified to be synthesized with the nanoparticles that made up the physical constitution of A.I.

They told about how their daily needs were provided for, according to the calculations of the machines. A certain physical specimen, with a particular function, would be given a carefully calculated amount and type of food, synthetic nutritional supplements, exercise regimens, sunlight and sleep hours, size of dwelling, as well as its aesthetics. It was all meant to produce the ideal composer, or writer, or actor, or sex slave, based on the cold demands of the madness of the machines and whatever fried conclusions their EMO-infected intellects came up with.

Meago and Evol had known of other human colonies around the world, but had never met them. They were kept in their own hive, inside the mountain. They assumed the other colonies were like this as well. The A.I. made it well known that they controlled the weather, food supplies, engineering and production of goods, and maintenance of all housing and infrastructure. All the humans had to do was follow their orders and perform their functions. And that’s what Meago and Evol had done. That’s all any human they’d ever known had done.

Tequi and Raw also attempted to do some educating of their own to Meago and Evol regarding Natural Law, non-aggression, and how this was the foundation of how the Space Agora functioned. They told of how, for hundreds of years, many species had lived in relative harmony with one another, and largely enjoyed peace and an extremely high degree of well-being. And it was all based on something so simple, and yet so powerful, as the Natural Moral Law of the Universe, of Creation itself. It all boiled down to this: Don’t Harm Others. That was it.

Obey that simple Law, and enjoy the fruits of freedom. Don't obey it, and suffer chaotic consequences.

Consequences like the ones suffered by Meago and Evol in the hyper-aggressive culture they had endured on Earth.

Meago and Evol tried to understand, but from where they were coming from, it was a vastly difficult transition. They mouthed the words, but would their actions correlate?

And one final occurrence of importance during their trek back to Agora One…..

Tequi was floating and twisting in low-g in the sensation room. His eyes were closed tight and a shit-eating grin enveloped his fuzzy five o'clock shadow. A plethora of color and light danced on his pores as 4D instrumentals massaged his inner ears.

"Tequi!"

Tequi jolted out of his tranquility and yelled at his ship, "You know not to bother me when I'm in the sensation room!"

"Yes, I know the rules better than you do," Turbo said with an annoyed tone.

"Apparently not," Tequi said.

"Normally I wouldn't bother you, but we're getting a distress signal. Time is of the essence if you want to help them. We'll have to slow to a crawl."

Tequi punched a holo-button, 1g returned, and he flopped less than gracefully onto his feet. "Who is it?"

"A small Cascadian cruiser with only two aboard, both Cascadian."

"Park us a light year from them. What seems to be their problem?"

"Inconclusive. Too much beta-space interference right now."

Tequi sighed. "We're the closest ones that can help?"

"By 12 earth hours."

"Ok, let me talk to 'em after I get dressed. I'll be in the cockpit in five."

Tequi threw on a collared shirt, Pulsarian cotton pants, and his trusty black cowboy hat. When he arrived in the cockpit, a shimmering Cascadian was on the holo-screen. Cascadians were aqueous beings, literally. They were made of a water sub-type, only known to be found on Cascadia. They had the appearance of a crystalline waterfall, on the verge of freezing. Misty verging on mystical. Their "extremities" consisted of thin, misty, twisting extensions protruding randomly from their central, cascading bodies. Their communication was done by making signs with those extremities. In order to translate, a machine would have to pick up the signs, and translate them into verbal tones. They were wondrous, marvelously gorgeous beings, always shimmering and bright.

Tequi smiled widely as he stared at the holo-image before him. "A pleasure to see you, as always. How can we be of assistance?"

The cascade of the being slowed nearly to a halt. This was what they did when they felt sadness and regret, or some other strong, negative emotion. It twisted signs and the translation came through, "I'm so sorry. Please forgive me."

Tequi scratched his whiskers, "Sorry for what?"

Four red and black ships appeared on other holo-projectors. One projector showed a macro view of the situation. Tequi and the Cascadian were now in a double-crossfire position between Piscoran Stinger Ships.

The Piscorans were the most notorious space pirates within this particular galactic cluster. They generally stood over three meters tall, had tough, insect-like exteriors, and six appendages, two with pincer claws, two with fingers and thumbs, and two wings. They were all various shades of red and had two triangular faces, facing in opposite directions, with two eyes on each face. Partly due to these advantageous physical traits, they were known to be nearly unbeatable at hand-to-hand combat. They were unscrupulous and crafty as well.

For millennia, the Piscorans had lived in a violent culture, full of war and deception. Their innovation and development had

been almost nil. One day, though, an ill-conceived trade mission from an intergalactic species to their home planet had been subverted and ruined by the aggressive locals. It was then that they stole their first technology that allowed them to go off-planet, and they had been slowly stealing more and spreading throughout multiple galaxies like a cancer ever since.

Tequi said, “Ok, let’s talk to the ugly suckers. Go ahead and open communications with them.”

Raw’s voice came next, surprising Tequi, “Hey, Tequi! Got a little problem. The frequency massager is out.”

Tequi shook his head emphatically and sighed dramatically, “Not now, Raw!” A huge, menacing Piscoran appeared in 3D right in Tequi’s face. “We’ve got a bigger problem right now!”

“What could be a more pressing matter than a broken massager?”

“Space pirates.”

Tequi initiated the conversation with the Piscoran, “Wow, what a nice surprise..”

Raw interrupted, “Can I come to the cockpit and watch?”

Tequi rubbed the back of his neck vigorously, “Computer, mute audio to Piscoran. No, Raw, go watch in the lounge or something! And don’t interrupt me again.”

Tequi then spoke in a ghastly tone to his ship, “Can you downsize the picture, please? My eyes can only handle so much nastiness, and that Piscoran is about one of the most nauseating things I’ve ever laid eyes on. Make him the size of a roach or something.”

The Piscoran’s image shrunk down to a size that could be easily squashed in Tequi’s grip. “That’s better. Ok, open the audio again.”

The Piscoran snapped its claws and glared at Tequi, “Are you the captain of the ship?”

“None of your damn business.”

The Piscoran’s eyes flared, “Keep it up and we’ll double our fee.”

"Fee?"

"For safe crossing, of course."

"Sorry, I'm broke."

"That's not what our ship's sensors tell me. You've got all sorts of valuables on board."

"Well, we were crossing just fine until you tricked us into stopping. Nice ruse, but I think we'll just keep on cruising, extortion free. Nice try, though."

"You must know that you're outnumbered."

"And you must know that you're outgunned and outwitted."

"How so?"

"Cuz the tech you're working with is like a Model T compared to my jet."

"A what?"

"Never mind."

The image of the Piscoran turned to shaky static and zapped out of existence. Tequi called out, "Nice work, boys."

A silver and gold robot with angular features, vaguely in the shape of a humanoid, showed up in Tequi's view. It spoke with a metallic twang, "Sure thing, Tequi. What were they thinking?"

"Hell if I know. Hubris and idiocy don't allow for very clear thinking."

"Apparently."

"Thanks, carry on."

"Will do. Shock One out."

Raw was laid back on a plush smart sofa in the viewing lounge, along with Meago and Evol. He asked Tequi, "What was that?"

"That was my robot security team. I always keep an extra ship 30 light years behind me as backup, just for such an occasion." He called out to Turbo, "Contact the Cascadian, please."

The Cascadian appeared before Tequi again, only this time about the size of a water glass. She was still flowing very slowly, openly showing signs of remorse.

Tequi said to Turbo, “Hey, you can make the Cascadian’s image life size, please.”

She became her full 2.5 meter high size. She apologized profusely again. Tequi replied sympathetically, “It’s ok. I know, they ambushed you or something and forced you to do it. You don’t have defense good enough to fend off four Piscorans, or outrun them at least? I find that surprising.”

“Normally we do, but this ship is an old wreck and in need of repairs. I’ve got a list a parsec long of things that need fixing.”

“Understood. If you want, I’ll have my security ship meet up with you and see about helping with repairs.”

“Thank you so much. That would be a huge relief.”

“I’ll send you the rendezvous coordinates in a minute.”

They finished shortly. Raw asked, “You’re not gonna charge them anything?”

“Nah. I’m a sucker for beauty.”

“And who said chivalry was dead?”

Chapter 8

The captain of the Piscoran ship had one face observing the celestial distance, and another turned to his chief engineer. The engineer had all appendages working feverishly on multiple control panels. One of the engineer's eyes couldn't help but occasionally look to the ship's captain a bit nervously. He had an urgent message to send, but the ship's communications, along with various other systems, had been knocked out by the blast from Tequi's security tail.

A third Piscoran, the head pilot, standing opposite the captain, asked, "I wonder what that weapon was, sir."

The captain turned a face to the pilot and said, "I don't know, but I want one." He cackled and snapped his claws wildly.

The engineer, working in an awkward position on the floor, announced proudly, "Captain, communications are back online."

"On to the weapons systems, then."

"Yes, captain." He fluttered his wings like a hummingbird and breezed away from the command bridge.

The captain ordered the computer, "Call Lord Moden."

In an instant, another Piscoran appeared holographically. He had a black and white checkered hologram running in perpetual circles around his two foreheads. This was the Piscoran version of a crown, which was always worn by the Lord of the Piscorans.

The captain and the pilot both curled and uncurled their bodies in reverence. After uncurling nearly to his full body length, the captain said, "Lord Moden, I am pleased to report that they are both aboard the human's ship. They should rendezvous with Agora One soon."

Moden's pincer claws rattled with excitement. "You performed your function well, captain. You'll now report to the new colony. Understood?"

"Understood."

The call ended and Moden, sitting stiffly in his throne-like captain's chair, stared out of the main observation deck of his ship. He stared thoughtfully at his, and all Piscorans, former home world, Piscora. It was now a lifeless, desolate, blood-red wasteland. He thought about previous generations, who had destroyed Piscora's environment. How could they have been so foolish? His great-grandfather crossed his mind, the one who had led the surviving Piscorans out into deep space and saved the species.

Then his mind went to current affairs. How to restore Piscora? The technology existed, and it would be his. Agora One would be his. The glory would be his. Piscora would be his. All he had to do was continue executing his plan, and he would reign Piscora and a greater Piscoran Empire. His claws rattled with excitement.

Chapter 9

Finally, after reaching Agora One...

"Your timing is horrible," Zay said with her hands on her hips and a foot tapping wildly.

Raw's droopy eyes shot wide, "Hey, great to see you, too, after six months. What's the problem?"

"My dad's here."

"Awesome! We can catch up!"

She pierced him with a jagged glare, "Your sarcasm is not appreciated."

He stepped closer to her and put on a grin that would make clowns blush, "I've got an act coming up in a few days. He should come! He'll get free drinks if he drops my name."

Raw's over-the-top absurdity was too much for her. She broke down and cracked a smile. He wrapped his arms around her shoulders and pulled her close. She tried to maintain an air of annoyance with him and the situation with the Earth natives showing up the same time as her dad. She couldn't, though. Raw was just too damned goofy and lovable to be negative around. Sure, he didn't have much material wealth. He got around in a clunker of a spaceship that made her eyes hurt. He did, however, have plenty of intangibles. Annoying the hell out of her father was one of them.

"My dad hates your shows."

"My shows require an acquired taste. He'll come around."

She tossed her long, thick mane of hair back, revealing more of her red-and-white collage of eye-catching skin on her neck and face, and asked, "So the Earth natives, they're with Tequi, right?"

"As far as I know, yeah, he's helping them get settled."

Over the course of the next few weeks, Agora One went to various worlds. It hosted a 5-tier poker tournament, and the finals of Andromeda's famed high-g Zorzaball tournament. Imagine

kind of a mix between tennis and rugby, only in triple earth's gravity. It was intense.

Various trade shows were conducted and Agora One was near full capacity. Agora One's two newcomers from Earth found things very intriguing on board. They had never experienced such freedom, nor so much variety in so many things. The food, music, art, culture blending (and sometimes clashing) were all fascinating to Meago and Evol.

Meago had also gotten to know Tequi and Raw quite well, but had especially gotten to know Zay very well. Meago had shown an interest in martial arts, and Zay was more than happy to train her and have a sparring partner. Meago was a natural, too, so it worked well for both of them.

A dark cloud hung over it all, though. Meago and Evol had secret objectives on board Agora One, and Meago's conscience was eating away at her insides.

And one day, it became too much to bear…..

"I can't go on like this," Meago lamented. She had been on Agora One nearly a month.

Tequi and Zay glanced at each other. Neither had a clue what Meago was getting at. Zay encouraged her, "Go head, whatever it is. Just let it out."

Meago locked eyes with Zay, then looked away and sobbed even harder. "I can't let this go on!"

Tequi shrugged, "Let what go on?"

"This fucking charade!"

"Who taught you to use f-bombs like that?"

Suddenly, she just blurted it out, "Evol and I, we're spies. They know everything now!" She grabbed her churning stomach and expelled some blood-curdling agony.

Zay and Tequi still didn't have a clue what she was talking about. "Go on," Zay urged softly.

"We've been spying on Agora One this whole time, Evol and I, for the Piscorans!"

This got their attention, especially Zay's. How and why would this last survivor from Earth be working with the Piscorans? As far as they knew, when Tequi had found them, they had never been exposed to alien species.

"We're not even brother and sister!" she shrieked. Her face was now full of rivers and red waves. Tequi walked over to her slowly and put his hands on her shoulders. Her head stayed down, unable to look him in the eye. He said, "Ok, now, if what you're telling us right now is true, then there are lots of gaps that need filling. The first thing I'd like to know is, if you're spying for the Piscorans, how did that come to be, and why are you doing it?"

Zay folded her arms and her tail whipped with a methodical, angry persistence, as she waited for a response.

Meago continued with a sorrowful, quivering voice, "The Piscorans came to Earth after the natural calamities. They took all of the human survivors away and made them slaves, including my family, my real family, not Evol."

"Don't forget how. How are you spying?"

"Well, for starters, I wasn't involved in the 'sadistic arts'. I was an actor. That's one reason I believe the Piscorans chose me to infiltrate your ship. I have a photographic memory, and I'm a good actor."

"So everything is still in your head and the Piscorans don't have it?"

"No. That's where Evol comes in. He transmits. I supply the info, and Evol does the transmission to them."

"Why didn't you do the transmissions?"

"Evol was trained to do it. I don't know how."

"So Evol wasn't a holo-sculptor on Earth? He's an actor, too? That was another lie?"

"No, he really is a holo-sculptor. That's a reason I think he was chosen. Some of what has been sent to the Piscorans has been in the form of 3D holo-designs, based on some of the wonders we've seen here on Agora One."

“You keep saying chosen, like there was some kind of wicked tryout period or something. What do you mean by ‘chosen’?”

“When the environmental disasters started to reduce in extremity and frequency, the Piscorans came. They took us off planet. There were huge complexes filled with people. As far as I know, we all went through the same procedures. They questioned us, tested us. We went through physical and mental examinations for weeks. After Evol and I were chosen, we went through an intensive training regimen and were given our first orders to infiltrate Agora One.”

“But how did they know that Agora One would eventually be involved?”

“That, I don’t know.”

Tequi scratched his whiskers thoughtfully. “Maybe the way we found out about the disaster on Earth was no coincidence.”

Raw said, “That seems apparent. I’d love to know more about Tabe’s source that delivered the news.”

Zay’s head was spinning. Her tail was whipping in a real frenzy now. “Yeah, we’ll need to have a talk with Tabe about this.” She lamented the fact that they hadn’t dug into the source of the information earlier. Perhaps it was coincidence, but there was a chance it wasn’t.

Masher said suspiciously, “Maybe those calamities weren’t just poorly maintained weather control systems after all.”

“What are you getting at?”

“If the A.I. from Earth were in compromised states from overuse of EMOS, they could have easily been subverted by a species with access to superior technology.”

“Like the Piscorans.”

“Like the Piscorans.”

Raw asked, “So Masher, you’re hypothesizing that it was no coincidence, that the calamities were caused by Piscoran interference?”

"If what Meago said just now is true, it would seem logical and perhaps even likely. It would make easy prey for them."

"But what about the A.I. on Earth?"

"They were destroyed either fighting one another, or would have easily been culled by the Piscorans. Those EMOS and the environmental disasters would have left the A.I. in a nearly impossible position to defend themselves."

"But why destroy them?"

"Eliminate what the Piscorans might view as their only real threat or competition. By eliminating the A.I. on Earth, it made it that much easier to capture all the remaining humans."

Meago was shaking uncontrollably. She was torn in too many directions emotionally. Fear for her family. Fear for herself. Disappointed that she had betrayed these wonderful people. And profoundly deep within her, there was an ever-so-slight kernel of relief that she was now letting the truth out.

"Masher, can you make her stop shaking?"

"No!" she screamed, "let me be!"

Everyone else peered around at each other, speechless for a few moments. Each one was lost in their own head, thoughts running in various directions, trying to cope. Trying to know how to proceed.

Zay's jaw tightened as she tried to control her slowly mounting rage, "How do we know you're not lying about what happened to the rest of the humans? How do we know you're not lying now?"

Masher didn't let Meago answer. "I'm perfectly capable of using advanced analytics to determine if she is truthful or not."

Zay lashed out, "Why didn't you think of that before you crossed multiple galaxies to deliver a spy into the most advanced and expensive ship in this part of the universe!" It took every ounce of strength she had not to snap and unleash her physical combat prowess all over the room. Now she was trembling, something Tequi and Raw had never seen her do.

“Do you know where your family was taken, or where the colony is?”

“We have coordinates, nothing more.”

“So what was their plan? Just leave you here as long as possible? They didn’t give you a stopping point or a next action to take?”

“They didn’t give us any further instructions.”

“That doesn’t make any sense. Why wouldn’t they have a plan to get you out at some point?”

Masher said, “There are three possibilities here. The first is that they have no plan to get you off of Agora One. The second is that they have a plan, but you’re not privy to it. The third is that you’re lying.”

“I have no reason to lie now.”

“Incorrect. You telling us this could be part of what the Piscorans are up to.” Masher paused and floated closer to Meago’s fretful figure. “Would you be willing to undergo an analysis to see if I can detect the truthfulness of your statements?”

“More than willing.”

Raw threw his hands up. “If she is telling the truth, then what?”

Everyone in the room glanced around making eye contact. What would they do? Drop the offenders off somewhere? Try to find the rest of the Earth humans and free them from one of the largest kidnappings in history?

Meago broke the uncertainty of the silence. “You have the means to free all of them, including my family.”

Zay laughed at the thought. “They’ll never send Agora One. We didn’t even get to go to Earth the first time, and now that things are more complicated with this whole spying ordeal, it’s a laughable joke to even suggest it. Especially because there isn’t even any proof. Just the story of a supposed spy.”

Tequi poured himself a drink and asked, “What if the existence of the slave colony could be proven? Wouldn’t it be the right thing to do to help free them?”

Raw answered, “Some might say that they have to free themselves, like our ancestors did.”

Masher countered, “And some might say they’ve been kidnapped and should be helped.”

Tequi tapped the pistol on his hip and shook his head emphatically. “How do I get myself into these things?”

“What are you thinking, Tequi?”

“That if Masher here gets results that she’s telling the truth, then I might be inclined to head to those coordinates and do some investigating.”

Zay’s tail whipped into a fresh frenzy. “You’d be making a big mistake.”

“Why do ya say that?”

“Because I think it’s a trap.”

“Well, you haven’t heard the rest of my plan yet. The wheels are turning in my head full throttle.”

“I thought I heard some slow, eerie creaking,” Raw quipped.

Zay cringed, “This is no time for jokes, Raw.”

“Au contraire, perilous times are when we need laughter most.”

Zay crossed her arms, “That’s a human belief I’m glad I don’t share.” She looked at Meago and asked, “What about Evol? Does he know you’re telling us?”

She shuddered at the thought. “Absolutely not. He might kill me if he knew.”

“We’ll have to deal with Evol immediately.”

“Not so fast. It might be better to let him think that everything is normal, otherwise he might panic, and who knows what he might do if he feels panic.”

“So just let him go on sending data to those parasitic Piscorans?”

“Good point. I think we should take measures to neutralize his operations immediately. We’ll need a smoking gun.”

Meago stared at the floor blankly and said sadly, “Like I said, I’m not privy to his transmissions.”

“I’ve got an idea. Tell him you came clean.”

“And get her killed?”

“I’m not finished. We’re gonna send her to Evol with backup, in case he gets violent.”

Meago perked up. “He won’t as long as someone else is there.”

“Don’t worry. We won’t send you in alone.”

“And if we get this admission or, God forbid, violent act? What then?”

“A ship-wide communique. Nobody will offer him sanctuary. Then we give him two options. Temporary confinement, or dropped off at the nearest authoritarian-controlled planet.”

Later that night, in Evol and Meago’s living quarters, Meago waited impatiently for Evol to make an appearance. She fidgeted nervously as her mind ran. She hoped she was doing the right thing. She hoped that everything would work out ok. That’s what happened when people did the right thing, right? Things went in their favor.

She heard the front entrance open. Meago peered down at her handbag quickly and whispered, “Well, here we go.”

Evol came in. Some sweat was glistening off his forehead. “Just back from the gym?”

“Yeah. The facilities on this thing are marvelous.”

He looked at Meago’s face. It showed uneasiness, which he picked up on immediately.

“There’s something important I need to tell you, Evol.”

“Yes, it’s written all over your face. What’s the matter?”

“I told Zay, Tequi, and some others about what we’ve been doing here on Agora One.”

Evol’s face flushed and his body stiffened with angst. “You did what?” he asked with disbelief. He took a couple steps closer. She rose from the sofa with eyes locked in his. You could

tell a lot about someone's intentions by looking in their eyes. She didn't like what she saw.

"You must be joking," he said sharply.

"I couldn't bear it anymore. All the lies. They're good people, Evol. I couldn't go on lying to them."

He took another step towards her. She gulped and took a deep breath. His fury grew. "But why tell them? To what end? What is that going to accomplish? You let your emotions get the best of you."

"I followed conscience, is what I did."

"You shouldn't have done that. We have a mission. Do you know what the Piscorans will do to us now? Or to our families?" He was freaking out. His heart raced. He lunged at Meago, who put her newly acquired combat skills to good use. She dodged him and put a defensive knee in his gut. He rolled and took her legs out, though, sending her tumbling to the ground. His anger carried him on top of her and, just as he was about to swing, a smothering cloud of sand swirled out of Meago's handbag and subdued him.

Meago gasped and scrambled to find her communicator. She did, and got Zay on the line. "There's your admission, with Dans as witness."

Chapter 10

A few days later, Tequi was about to embark on another adventure. This time, it was to the coordinates that Meago had supplied. Preparations were being made to take off shortly. In the days that followed the admission from Evol, Tabe's contact that had originally supplied the information about the calamity on Earth had been contacted. It was a friend of Tabe's, a fellow Talem, who admitted that he had made that communication under duress. He had been ambushed by over 10 Piscoran ships and had been specifically instructed to contact Agora One with the news.

Evol had also been dealt with. Part of Tequi's quarters had been partitioned, soundproofed, and made into a holding cell. Since Tequi had brought him aboard, he had to take the responsibility of confining the criminal until Evol was off the ship. Meago, meanwhile, hadn't been confined, but had agreed to be put under 24 hour surveillance from a shadow drone. These were the punishments until Tequi brought both of them to the coordinates that Meago had supplied, where, supposedly, they would find the last Earth humans and some of their Piscoran captors.

As they began the journey, Turbo spoke harshly, "Morquellia, of all places. How did I ever allow myself to get hoodwinked into doing this?"

"Hoodwinked?" Tequi asked. He chuckled heartily as he lay back in a deep-tissue detox lounge chair. His eyes were slits and he grinned happily as the euphoria of rejuvenation was pulsing through his pores. "You knew exactly what you were getting into, just like the rest of us. Besides, what's not to like about Morquellia?"

Raw grinned, "Let me take this one, Turbo. What's not to like about Morquellia? Where to begin?"

"I was being sarcastic. Please don't tell me."

Tequi and Raw both knew more than enough about their destination to make them queasy. Morquellia was about as swampy and murky a place as one could imagine. The native

inhabitants took after their environment. They were quite oozy creatures, roughly the body type of an Earth bullfrog, stood about human height, and held a sub-zero on the cuteness scale. They were a terribly violent species, and had been for thousands of years. Their society was extremely stratified, with a tiny minority ruling over a huge underclass of slaves. The rulers were grotesquely bloated figures, due to their overindulgence and sedentary lifestyle. The slave class were overworked and malnourished, so they naturally took on a gaunt appearance. In recent years, the slave class had been dying off at an alarming rate, and the environment was also suffering degradation from centuries of abuse and misuse. They had extremely primitive technology compared to those in the Space Agora,

"What do you think the Piscorans want with the Morquellians?"

"Who are you asking?"

Tequi grinned. "Masher seems to be the brightest one here, so Masher I guess."

Turbo shrieked, "Hey, I'm newer and much more advanced than Masher!"

"Yeah, but Masher's been around for 500 years and has a wealth of first-hand experience."

Masher assembled its floating particles into human form, complete with a tasteful clothing ensemble from the mid-21st century, and took a seat near Raw. "I suppose we might find out when we get there."

Raw groaned. "Aw, come on! What kind of an answer is that?"

"How am I supposed to know?"

"Hypothesize."

"From what I know of the two species, it appears possible that they could have mutual interests in alignment."

"Such as?"

"The Morquellian population has been declining for over a century, They could be in search of fresh blood and fresh slaves. This would be supplied by the Piscorans with the Earth survivors

they've kidnapped. It also seems logical to think that, due to the extreme environmental problems they face, the tiny ruling segment of the population could be looking to the Piscorans for technology to go off planet."

"I could have told you that."

"Stop it, Turbo!"

"What would the Piscorans get out of the deal?"

"A base of operations on a planet with excellent natural defenses. Nebulae, asteroid fields, not to mention the hazy and murky conditions on Morquellia itself."

Tequi asked through his permagrin, courtesy of his detox lounger, "Whatever happened to the Piscoran home world anyway?"

"They destroyed it shortly after stealing technology necessary to go intergalactic."

Tequi stopped grinning. "Why'd they do that?"

"It wasn't on purpose."

"Right. Turbo, how long til we reach the asteroid field?"

"About 22 minutes."

Raw quipped, "Not very exact for a machine."

"Tequi just tells me to round up or down when it comes to time, despite my protests."

"That might bite you in the keister one of these days, Tequi."

"And after we get past the asteroid field, how long til we reach the nebula?"

"Just shy of an hour at top speed."

"Ok, give a friendly reminder to Shock One about their responsibilities."

Raw said, "Give me a friendly reminder as well."

Tequi sighed, "Turbo, please throw up a holo map."

A holographic map of the local star systems they were entering, from the point of their current location, to Morquellia, illuminated the high, angled ceiling above them. Tequi rose and started pointing. When he pointed at a place on the map, it glowed in correspondence as if being touched.

Tequi explained, “There’s the asteroid field. There’s the nebula. There’s Morquellia, in all its anti-glory. We’re going to go around the asteroid field and the nebula, which will take a little longer, but is much safer and easier to navigate. While we’re speeding around those obstacles, Shock One and Boomerang will do some investigating. Shock One will search for Piscoran ships in the asteroid field. Boomerang will search the nebula.”

Raw got a more-confused-than-normal look on his face. Tequi took note. “Question, Raw?”

“Yeah, who or what is ‘Boomerang’?”

“I suppose we’ll go ahead and let you in on that little secret. Turbo, put Boomerang’s pilot on the holo.”

A satisfied, red-and-white face popped up above the group, grinning ear-to-ear.

Raw wrinkled his nose and groaned.

“Happy to see me?”

“What are you doing?”

“Flying a spaceship, which is more than I can say for you,” Zay quipped.

“Your dad’s gonna kill you!”

“Nah, I’ll just blame you.”

“Ha ha, right. Why didn’t you tell me you were coming?”

“Cuz I didn’t want to hear you whine.”

“You told your dad, though, right?”

“Nah, I just left Agora One to fend for themselves.”

Raw blinked.

“Of course I told him! He forbid it, I laughed, end of story.” She turned her attention to Tequi. “Can we go on with the plan, please?”

“Gladly. As I was saying, Zay, you’ll pilot Boomerang through the nebula and look for any Piscorans that might be hanging around.”

“I thought sensors were useless in the nebula.”

“Ship’s sensors are, but that’s where Fost comes in.”

Raw asked nervously, “Fost is with you, Zay?”

“Stay focused, Raw. It’ll be ok, I promise.”

"Fost can, like all Ducleds, sense other life forms at great distances, even in a nebula. After they report their findings, we'll continue to approach Morquellia, and they'll fall back to their preplanned distances. Shock One will stay 500LY back, and Boomerang will be 1,000LY back of Shock One."

"Wait, what if they find some Piscorans lurking?"

"They'll report it to us and ignore them."

"And if they're engaged by them?"

"If by engaged, you mean violently attacked, then they'll defend themselves, naturally. Now, once Morquellia gets within range of Turbo's sensors, then we can start to see what's going on there. If they have ships in orbit, what the situation on the ground is, and soforth. If their presence is too great in number, we'll have no choice but to flee."

"What number do you call too great?"

"Turbo, I leave this in your capable non-hands."

"Based on what I know about Piscoran technological capabilities, I could handle at least five of them at once. More than that would be risky."

"Keep in mind the info they stole from Agora One. They might have upgraded capabilities."

"They probably haven't had time to implement it yet."

"Anyway, we'll judge the situation as it presents itself and figure out what action to take at that point. Ok, everyone get ready. Oh, and Turbo, where's Tabe at?"

"Still snoozing."

"Get that clumsy metal brute up and update him on our status, will ya?"

"One more important thing," Raw said. "Why is your other ship called Boomerang?"

Tequi sighed, "Put it on the holo, Turbo."

A boomerang shaped vessel popped up a few inches from Raw's face.

Chapter 11

After skirting the perimeter of the asteroid field and nebula, and receiving word from both Boomerang and Shock One that no Piscoran presence was detected, Tequi proceeded towards Morquellia. Turbo parked a pedestrian 10 light years shy of the puke-green colored planet. Shock One and Boomerang fell back to their preplanned distances.

Two Piscoran ships were in orbit around Morquellia. Tequi asked, “Life signs on ships, Turbo?”

“There are two Piscorans and 101 humans on each vessel, along with five mobile and non-intellectual machines.”

“You can just call ‘em robots, thanks.”

Raw looked queasily at the scene of a puke-green planet being flanked by two death-red ships of the Piscorans. “Do they intentionally make their ships so fuggly?”

Masher mocked, “We didn’t come all this way to judge their taste in aesthetics, Raw. Beauty is subjective, anyway.”

“I can’t believe they’ve got that many people crammed into little ships like that. They must be packed tighter than Bizorian Squeeze Fleas.”

Tabe asked, “What about on the ground? How many Piscorans?”

“It appears that they only have two SPEED-capable ships on the surface.”

“The ones in orbit are, too?”

“Yep.”

“What level?”

“Five.”

“So we can double their speed, and we know our weapons and shielding are superior, so how about we investigate in person?”

“To what end?”

“Well, we can at least free some of the prisoners. We can accommodate a hundred more, at least.”

"A hundred-one if Raw decides to vacation on Morquellia."

"Only if you stay to keep me company, Tabe."

"Have we been scanned?"

"No, they're aware of our presence, but appear to be ignoring us."

"They know we can outgun and outrun them, so they probably are waiting for us to make the first move."

"Tequi, you sound almost like you've got a touch of hubris."

"Just stating a fact, that's all. Turbo, how many more humans are on Morquellia?"

"Over ten thousand. Half are underground."

Tequi looked at Masher, "Obviously, we can't free all the prisoners, but some is better than none. Masher, you're the most well-suited candidate for a stealth move. How about it?"

"What's your objective, Tequi?"

"Offer the humans on board one of the ships an escape. We'll send a fleet of escape pods with you, if they accept. Turbo, you can disable the Piscorans and their bots, right?"

"Don't insult me with such trivial questions."

"Now who's got hubris? Anyway, how about it, Masher?"

"I'll go in through one of their waste disposal subsystems. Those will be the easiest to penetrate undetected. I'll stay in contact with Turbo throughout."

Masher's glowing particles dissolved from human shape and became a floating mass again, like a cloud or a magic carpet. Just as it was about to exit, Tequi yelped, "Wait, hold on!"

All eyes and sensors went to Tequi. "It just dawned on me that maybe Masher isn't the best choice for this."

Raw quipped, "Are you going to disassemble all your cells and reassemble on their ship, like Masher?"

"Seriously, funny man, think about it. All those people over there lived under a tyranny run by A.I. It's all they know."

"He has a point. I didn't take into account the emotional implications of my appearance before them," Masher conceded.

Raw's eyes popped and he exclaimed, "I got it! Lucky for all of us, I've got a genius plan."

Tabe scoffed.

Raw continued, "Masher, you sneak in, do a little recon, and disable their security systems so Tequi and I can come aboard. When we get in, you sneak out. The prisoners will only see humans, so we don't unsettle them."

Tequi looked Raw in the eye and smiled proudly. He grasped his friend on the shoulder and said, "Raw, that's a damn fine plan. I knew you'd contribute something eventually."

Raw's face scrunched as he absorbed Tequi's teasing wit. Tequi turned back to Masher, "Ok, you're up. Turbo, get us within range so Masher can reach their ship in minutes, and make sure those Piscorans are having deep dreams before his arrival, ok?"

"Piscorans don't dream, but their skeleton crew has already been put to sleep, if that's what you mean."

Masher modified its particles to withstand the conditions of space. It floated easily out of Turbo through the environmental control systems and out into space. Once in space, it shot itself like a streak towards one of the Piscoran ships and halted itself microns in front of the outer hull. Turbo helped guide Masher to one of the waste disposal systems and after finagling with the main computer for a moment, gained access. The disposal system was opened on a micro level, allowing Masher's nano-particles to slip through as smooth as silk.

Masher, guided by Turbo's reading of the ship's internal schematics, zipped through a maze of ducts, pipings, wirings, casings, and other structural components until it finally came into a space big enough to hold a humanoid. It was in a corridor. A six-wheeled service bot stood frozen. Masher noted how eerily silent everything was, almost lifeless.

Turbo guided Masher to the cockpit, where it found two Piscorans slumped over at ninety-degree angles, all four faces snoozing away, thanks to the sleep pulse Turbo had sent minutes earlier. Masher absorbed all the data from the main control board,

found the cargo bay docking controls, and disabled their security protocols.

Tequi and Raw were waiting in two rescue pods when Turbo announced, “Ok, ready when you are. Their cargo door’s security system is off. You’ll be free to enter.”

“We’ll take off after we have more details about the human occupants and exactly where they are on the ship.”

“And what their status is.”

Turbo guided Masher to where the other life signs were coming from. When Masher reached a spade-shaped metallic door and was about to gain entry, a ferocious silvery fist smashed into the door. The blow had been meant for Masher. Masher had split itself into a fountain of particles to barely avoid the blow.

Masher yelled at Turbo, “I thought you had all of their defenses neutralized!” A ray blasted from the forearm of the giant quasi-metallic creature and whipped up and down the walls of the corridor and entryway.

“I guess I missed one,” Turbo said dryly.

“Any chance you could go ahead and finish the job?!”

“I’m working on it,” Turbo said with an annoying casualness.

Masher shot into an air duct to find temporary sanctuary from the onslaught of whatever it was that was attacking it. The hulking, silvery figure pounded a fist into the vent and cut through it like butter. It sent flame racing through the air duct and Masher shot into a secondary conduit just in time to dodge the golden rage.

“Got it,” Turbo said, sounding very pleased. The giant crumpled to the floor with an unceremonious thud. Masher shot back out the charred duct and into the open, where it took note of the fallen being. “Why didn’t you see this cyborg,” Masher said, annoyed.

“Nobody’s perfect,” Turbo said defensively. “Did it used to be human?”

“Well, it looks like it could have been human at some point. It has similar physiology, but has metallic skin, if you can

call it that. And the brain, oh dear," Masher explained and then stopped cold.

"What's that, 'oh dear', Masher?" Tequi joined in the convo, having been patched through by Turbo.

"The brain has been modified with technological components. I have seen cyborgs before, but none quite like this. Turbo, you can't see if the others beyond this entryway have similar modifications, can you?"

"Many are fully human, others are not."

Masher said, "I'll go ahead and take a look."

"You have a disguise so you don't freak them out?"

"I'll appear as a beam of light."

And so it did, streaming through a tiny crevice in the entryway that had been caused by Turbo. Masher was astonished by what it saw.

A room with space for about 75 people, which was currently holding nearly 100. They were all human, or at least mostly human, as many of them had various bodily modifications. Some were shooting each other, absorbing various firearm projectiles in a carefree manner, as if they were children playing with nothing more than snowballs. Some were walking on the walls and the dimly lit, high ceiling. Others were engaged in games such as multi-tier poker and drinking and smoking to their hedonistic content. A few were stacked on top of each other, in unbelievably uncomfortable positions. By their facial expressions, nobody would have been the wiser, however. They had looks of utter bliss on their faces, murmuring and groaning with pleasure. None of them took notice of the new beam of light that had entered their environment, or so it seemed. Masher decided to leave, just in case one of them had the ability to sense A.I.

Masher reported its findings to Tequi and Raw, who grew more perplexed by the second. "Were they all modified?"

"63 percent have been modified. The rest appear to have normal human physiology."

Tequi peered through the clear bubble of his pod and exchanged looks with Raw. “What do ya think, Raw? Should we give it a go?”

“They could be hostile, the modified ones, I mean. They don’t know us from Adam.”

“True,” Tequi agreed, as his gaze drifted off deep in his own analysis of the situation. If two strangers just magically showed up in that room full of cyborgs, what kind of reaction would they receive? Chances were high, it seemed to both Raw and Tequi, that they wouldn’t be receiving the warmest of welcomes, to say the least. They did have the advantage of superior technology, but outnumbered by so many and in such close quarters would negate that advantage. Even with Tabe along, they would still be facing immense odds. And to what end? Was it too late to rescue the ones that had been modified, like the one that had been hell-bent on extinguishing Masher in the corridor?

Tabe broke the thoughtful silence. “I’ve got an idea.”

“Go ahead, Tabe.”

“Contact them by hologram. If they shoot your face off, at least it’ll just be a fancy light show.”

“Thanks for painting that vivid picture, Tabe.”

“It’s a good idea.”

“I didn’t say it wasn’t a good idea. Let’s do it.”

They groaned and piled out of the pods, making their way back to the observation lounge. Tequi took a seat on his favorite detox lounger. A holo-control popped up next to him and Turbo informed him that everything was set for direct transmission to the room Masher had been in.

“Wait,” Raw said anxiously. “You’re not really gonna show up in a lounge chair and expect them to take you seriously, are you?”

Tequi gave a scowl to his friend and grudgingly rose. “Let her rip.”

A holographic image of Tequi, nearly a flawless physical representation of him, appeared next to a poker table on one of

the Piscoran ships. All activity screeched to a halt, and nearly 200 eyes took in the new presence. A dozen cyborgs raised weapons at the intruder. A young male figure from the back of the room ordered, “Stop! Lower your weapons.”

They obeyed. Tequi spoke to the young man, who appeared to not be modified. “Greetings.”

“Likewise,” said the young man. “You are human?”

“Yes,” Tequi said.

“What do you want?”

“You have all been taken here from Earth against your will, is that correct?”

“Quite to the contrary, we have happily been relocated by our saviors, the Piscorans.”

Tequi struggled to not gag, “Saviors?”

“Yes, the Piscorans vanquished our former masters. We are now free. Your facial expression tells me that you are shocked by this information. Are you not from Earth?”

“My ancestors were from Earth, but I wasn’t living there when the Piscorans came.”

Tequi thought of Meago, who had volunteered to go into stasis and was still in a deep sleep. “I was told that you were being held as slaves here by the Piscorans. I am offering an escape from your servitude.”

This drew a wave of grunts, roars, and murmurs from the crowd. The young one smiled at Tequi, “I can assure you, nobody is here against their will. We are happy to join the Piscoran race and to spread its majesty throughout the universe.”

Tequi continued uneasily, “I see. I’ll leave you in peace, then. I just say, before I go, if anyone wishes to leave by their own free will, speak now, and we’ll help you escape.”

All stared at him with flat faces as the room fell pin-drop silent.

Tequi stopped the transmission. He looked at Raw. “I’ve got a bad feeling about this. Turbo! Get us out of here, max speed!”

In a flash, they were passing celestial objects. They rounded the asteroid belt and the nebula. Shortly thereafter, a transmission came in from Shock One. “Ambush!”

Tequi screamed, “What’s that, Shock One?”

The transmission was cut. “Turbo, what happened to Shock One?”

“Inconclusive. What I do know is that there are Piscoran ships, over 100, coming from all possible directions. We’ve been encircled and if all current trajectories hold we’ll intercept a Piscoran vessel in less than 5 earth minutes.”

Tequi’s face soured. Raw trembled. Masher glowed red. Tabe spun midair with the fervor of anticipation.

At the same time on Boomerang, Fost turned 3 of his eyes to Zay, who was busy piloting Boomerang away from the Piscoran ambush, with mere seconds to spare. He kept his other three eyes on the holo-viewer. He said, “Tequi’s ship has been captured by a swarm of Piscorans. Shock One has been destroyed.”

Zay’s whip-like tail started to slice through the air in a circular pattern, gaining speed as she processed what she was hearing. It was almost unreal, as if in a bad dream.

“Boomerang, head to Agora One intercept, max speed.”

Chapter 12

The luminous scales on Noc's face darkened and flared. His voice dropped heavily as he tried to control his mounting rage, "I've done everything you've asked, but this is out of the question. My cooperation stops now."

"That would be unwise for your personal comfort," Moden boomed.

"I don't have the power to send Agora One to you, even if I wanted to. It's a decision made by an ownership board, the ones that own the core infrastructure. Why do you want Agora One to go anyway? You'll get annihilated! Have you gone mad? Correction, even madder?"

"I'm sorry to hear that, old friend."

"Don't call me that. We never were friends before, and we certainly aren't now. I've done all I'm going to do for you. Now get out of my life!"

"Very well, Noc. You've made your choice. I'll see you after the so-called 'annihilation', as you put it."

Moments later, as Noc was trying to stop fuming from his excruciating conversation with Moden, another holo-call on his personal line caught his attention. He glared at the blinking holo-emitter and reluctantly bellowed an order to receive the call. His daughter's distraught face appeared before him. He was nearly too upset to notice. "What now, Zay?" he huffed as his scales flared.

"They've been captured by the Piscorans."

"This shouldn't surprise you."

"We got ambushed as well, but had a big enough distance between us that enabled our escape."

His eyes scowled and face twisted, "Congratulations."

"How can you be so cold?"

"How could you go into a situation like that? How could you leave Agora One on a whim like that? How could you betray

your own father and the thousands of Agora One customers and crew that count on you?"

"Is that all you can say? You're not going to ask if we're ok? Or if we can help Raw and my friends?"

"What is this 'we' business? Your friends got themselves into trouble, doing stupid things, and now they're paying a price."

"How can you be so heartless?"

"How can you be so naive? I didn't raise such a naive, weak child, did I?"

"No, you didn't raise me at all. You were too occupied with business."

This stung Noc. He gave pause and took a deep breath. "Look, Zay, even if I wanted to help them by sending Agora One, it's not my decision to make. The core ownership board has to agree on it. I'm only one. There are many others. You know that!"

"And how many of them know Tequi or someone else in the Vox family? Call a meeting and bring it to their attention. At least do that much!"

"The more important question is, as you know with all decisions and actions, is it moral under Natural Law? Were Tequi, Raw, and their companions in the right?"

"All evidence we have suggests that the survivors of Earth's environmental calamities were kidnapped by the Piscorans. Yes, trying to rescue victims of kidnapping is morally justified! You know that!"

"Be that as it may, Agora One is not a rescue ship. It also has some technical flaws that are still being worked out, as you well know. I suggest you make the inhabitants of Agora One aware of the situation and those that wish to may use their own resources to mount a rescue operation for their beloved friends. Or Tequi's family, for that matter."

"That's true, but it will take much longer. Agora One is just hours away right now. Keep in mind that the longer they have Tequi's ship, the better chance they'll have to copy its tech. That'll make the Piscorans an even greater menace."

He looked thoughtfully for a moment at his daughter's determined face. Her fiery determination reminded him of Zay's mother.

Zay continued, "I'm going back for them, regardless. Just keep that in mind."

He gulped hard, "I'll talk to the board."

Chapter 13

Tequi, Raw, Masher, and Tabe were in four separate, transparent force-field cell blocks. Meago and Evol had been taken off of Turbo as well, but were not nearby.

Masher was floating in the center of its space, with its highest defensive protocols active, in order to prevent any hacking attempts to gain control of its functions. Tabe had gone into a hibernation state, laying perfectly still in the center of its cell. Raw was curled in the fetal position, snoring, with mouth drooping open. Tequi sighed and looked at his companions enviously. He certainly couldn't sleep at a time like this.

He'd only been imprisoned once before, and that was only for a short while for a misunderstanding on Xonora. This was different. These were the Piscorans. There was no telling what they had in store for Tequi, his friends, or his ship, for that matter. He wondered how Turbo was doing, and had a slight internal chuckle at the prospect of Turbo exercising some of its rather unorthodox defense protocols. It was a near certainty that the Piscorans would attempt to reverse-engineer, or at least copy, some of Turbo's more advanced systems. Any attempt at doing so, however, would be met by resistance, such as convenient power outages, electrical shocks when touched, environmental control problems, and many other "unfortunate" malfunctions that would inhibit any intrusion. As long as they didn't manage to gain control of Turbo's core, then they would have a giant, nearly useless, and almost untouchable pile of parts on their hands. Then there was Shock One, which surely had been destroyed, one way or another. Either it had been overwhelmed by a swarm of ships and gone down swinging, or it had gone into auto-destruct mode to escape capture. The autonomous robots on board, and the ship itself, were programmed this way.

Tequi's mind wandering was interrupted with a jolt to his electro-cage. His eyes met a Piscoran face. Its beady, hollow eyes looked at him disparagingly. The others received the same jolt in order to break them from their slumber. Raw slowly and

reluctantly became conscious of his surroundings, wiped his big, tired eyes and stared at his captor blankly. The Piscoran guard spoke firmly as it paced slowly with its lower appendages, “You must prepare yourselves for the coming of Lord Moden. Kneel and bow your heads. Don’t look at his face.”

“Gladly,” Raw muttered.

The Piscoran glared at Raw, “It is an honor and privilege to speak with Lord Moden. Why he is bothering to use his time to interact with an inferior species such as yourselves, I don’t know, but who am I to question Lord Moden?”

Tequi chuckled, “I don’t have respect for violent thugs, so I’ll have to pass. Not that I bow to anyone, anyway.”

The Piscoran hissed, rattled its claws wildly, and its stinger uncurled, ready to strike. “Back away, soldier,” came a thunderous voice from the dripping entryway to the cavern. The guard recognized the voice, and immediately turned and bowed.

Moden took long, slow, calculated steps towards the cell cluster, while he kept one face focused on the prisoners and his other face watching his back, as always. “Leave us,” he ordered the guard, who scurried off instantly through a secondary exit.

Moden stopped in front of the cell block and looked at his prisoners as if they were prey. Tabe thrust himself with all his might at the force field, but was repelled easily. Moden looked at the powerful, gunmetal-colored Tabe with keen interest. “This is my first time meeting one of the mighty Talem species. Such wonderful physical and mental traits, a shame they should go to such a waste. In good time, though, your kind will serve a greater purpose.”

Moden turned abruptly, gazing at Raw with one face, and Tequi with the other. “Which is more than I can say for your kind. Humans, the most fragile of all. I must say, though, Tequi, is it? Yes, Tequi, your family’s reputation is well known to me. After sampling some of your family’s product that you have aboard your ship, I now know why. It’s an intriguing libation.”

Tequi and Raw both stood with their arms crossed, stiff, unflinching.

Moden continued, “I suppose you might have some questions for me, but first, I’ve got some for you. Did you actually think that the ships you found in orbit would have such porous defenses? Are you that naive?”

“Well, we know that pirates aren’t too bright, so yeah, we figured it would be a cakewalk.”

“If we, pirates, as you say, aren’t so bright, then what does that say about yourselves?”

Tequi and Raw grimaced and held their tongues.

“Secondly, I must thank you for bringing Meago and Evol back to me. They did a fine con job, didn’t they?” Moden whipped his tongue at one of the flies revolving near his face and ingested it in one fell swoop. This was common for him when he got excited, and talking about con jobs certainly did the trick.

Tequi and Raw grabbed their stomachs and looked away. Pleased with himself, Moden prompted his prisoners, “Please, I know you’re itching to ask questions, so by all means, proceed.”

Tequi began, “What are you doing with the humans you kidnapped from Earth?”

“You mean the ones that I liberated from that inferior hellhole they were stuck on?”

“From one hellhole to another.”

“Why didn’t they try to leave with you if they’re so trapped in this hellhole?”

“You’ve got them under mind control, it appears. And I have to ask, if we’re such a ‘fragile’ species, as you put it, then why keep them around? Why go through the trouble of trapping us here, for that matter?”

“It’s very simple, actually. Yes, humans are very fragile, like glass. But also, like glass, they can be put to good use.”

“Taking people through violent means for any purpose that is against their will is wrong.”

“Oh, how preachy of you! Spare me your idyllic fantasies! They are lucky to have an opportunity to join the Piscorans at such an opportune time!”

“And what time would that be?”

"The birth of the first Universal Piscoran Empire! Of course, the species that join my empire will never be Piscoran, shamefully enough, but they can learn the Piscoran ways and contribute to the greatness of the empire!"

Moden's stinger and claws rattled like a symphony of maracas from his intense hubris.

Tequi said, "So that explains at least one other reason why you're here on Morquellia, of all places. You're taking some Morquellians into the ranks of your foot soldiers. I'm guessing you don't plan on stopping at Morquellia. You're going to bring other immoral, low-tech species in to live and die for you as well." He paused and shook his scruffy face emphatically, "And that'll be your so-called empire."

"You're smarter than you look, I must say. Bravo. You know a bit about empire building! No doubt you know this due to the ancient history of your home planet, Earth."

"What the hell do you want with us?"

"He's hoping to lure Agora One and capture it," Masher interjected.

"Your artificial intellect serves you well," Moden said as he gave a mock stab towards Masher with his stinger.

"What are you talking about, Masher?"

"Agora One will likely come to our aid, and Moden thinks he can overtake them like he did us."

"He's not that insane, is he?"

"Dude, he's standing right there."

"Ya, I know. Don't care."

Raw said confidently, "There's no way they'd send Agora One. On the contrary, Zay's dad would be quite pleased to be rid of me, I'm sure. Sorry about your luck, Tequi."

"As amusing as all this is, I must be going. Before I do, though, I have a most wonderful gift to bestow on you. Especially you, Raw."

"Real metallic shackles to go with the electronic barrier?"

"I'm going to give you the truth."

"Now I know you're lying."

"Noc is one of us."

"Insane, megalomaniac, compulsive liar. You hit the trifecta!"

Their two-faced tormentor grasped a portable holo-emitter. Schematics of Agora One's environmental systems began showing in full detail. Moden's face lit up with dark pleasure.

Raw looked at Tequi. Tequi looked at Raw. They both shrugged. "I have no idea what that is."

Masher said, "That's the blueprint for the environmental system on Agora One."

Moden bellowed, "I'll leave it to you to ponder why and how I attained it, and more importantly, how I might use it. And while you still can, I might add." He strode away through the dark tunnel from which he came.

Raw had a befuddled look on his baby-face, "Well, that was cryptic enough. What do you think he meant by that?"

Tabe was spinning excruciatingly fast. "Calm down, Tabe. Save your energy for when we have a chance to escape."

Masher said, "Perhaps what he meant by his final statement was that you will soon lose your cognitive functions."

"Thanks for that happy insight, Masher."

Tabe said with a deep tone of disapproval, "Is everything a joke to you, Raw?"

"It's just my way of fighting off fear. It's a defense mechanism. Laugh or cry, right? I prefer to laugh."

Tequi looked at Masher's hovering particle cloud. "Masher, how could that wicked maniac have gotten his claws on the environmental control information for Agora One? Isn't that part of the core infrastructure that only a tiny minority of the core ownership group has access to?"

"And certain A.I., like myself," Masher confirmed.

"So how could Moden gain access?"

"The most logical explanation seems to be that someone with access granted it to Meago and Evol while they were on board."

"You think that it was Noc, don't you!"

"We cannot rule out that possibility. He does have access to such information, and if what Moden says about him is true, then it becomes an even more likely prospect."

"Why would he tell us, though?"

"Why do psychopaths do anything?"

"They do things to suit their desires. How your knowledge of Noc's supposed complicity with the Piscorans can serve Moden's purposes remains to be seen."

Chapter 14

Zay paced back and forth impatiently, trying desperately to control her angst. Rage at the Piscorans. Angry at her father. Angry that the Agora One core ownership board had rejected the idea of a rescue effort almost unanimously. Resentment at Raw for going off on that ill-fated adventure in the first place. And now, perturbed at herself for not being able to stop her friends from being captured.

Fost floated near her, and Dans, joining via holo-call from her home world, was spinning her particles methodically in a figure-eight pattern, what she always did when involved in intense thought. She was on her home world because the final transition into her sex change had begun, and it was necessary to be there.

Fost calmly suggested, “Let’s review the options.”

“Please,” Zay said harshly.

“Tequi’s family cannot go it alone. They don’t have nearly enough ships to face an armada, even though they clearly have a technological edge.”

“So far as we know,” Dans interjected. “We don’t know what else the Piscorans have managed to steal.”

“True,” Fost said tonelessly. “Agora One will not go, and those who are living or staying on Agora One right now could band together in a rescue effort, but this would take time to organize.”

“And we don’t have much time, because we don’t know if they plan on keeping them on Morquellia.”

“We also don’t know what they will do to them.”

Zay sighed, “Thanks, that’s a comforting thought.”

Fost focused all six eyes on Zay. “You can’t rule out the possibility that the Piscorans will do unpleasant things to our friends, especially when we already have some knowledge of what they’ve done to the Earth humans.”

What had they done to the Earth humans? They were clearly cooperating with the Piscorans, but why? They knew that

some of them had implants. This could account for mind control over some, but what about the others? No concrete reasons were known why a large segment of the captured humans were behaving the way the Piscorans wished. And that was only on the one ship that Tequi had encountered. What of the majority on the surface? Were the Earth survivors really that grateful to the Piscorans for eliminating their previous rulers, a crazed A.I. doped up on pseudo-emotional stimuli? And what would happen with Meago and Evol? Meago, if she was genuine in her reasons for her confession to Zay and the others, could possibly be spreading word to her fellow prisoners about better possibilities. Would she tell the tale of the better life presented by living under Natural Law in a greater Space Agora, where freedom and innovation flourished? Or was she acting the entire time as part of a complex ruse devised by the Piscorans? And what would the Piscorans do with their two spies? Would they keep them around, let them go, or murder them?

And what did they know about the Piscorans? They had no home world. Its environment had become unlivable. They had stolen nearly all of the advanced technology they had, which was considerable. They lived by a certain code, a very dark code. Their rampant egotism dictated that survival was the number one objective, at any and all costs. A dogmatic belief that physical might made right. The strongest and most ruthless had the right to rule. This had always been a part of their culture. But since the loss of their home world, it had morphed into something much more sinister. Desperation to survive off planet had only increased their intense will to survive at all costs. In their minds, if they could trick you, or overpower you, defraud you, or steal from you, then it was their right to do so. This was, of course, in stark contrast to the true Natural Laws of the universe.

Dans broke out of the figure-eight pattern and became a thin, humanoid figure. Dans exclaimed, “I’ve got it! I have an idea! Why didn’t I think of this earlier? Well, I suppose it didn’t take me too long! This is so exciting!”

“You’re rambling! Out with the idea, already!” Zay yelled in Dans’s outline of a face.

“No need to get huffy, my oh my!” Dans said with a hint of hurt in her voice. “I suppose it’s excusable, considering the circumstances. Anyway, here’s the idea. Tequi is immensely popular, right? There are a great many individuals on board Agora One who will certainly sympathize with us in this situation.”

“Raw has a great number of allies as well.’

“I wouldn’t use the word ‘great’ in this case, Zay. He has a small fan base, but….”

“Ok, ok, I get it.”

“But you’re right, Raw will have support from some of the current residents on Agora One. We also know that there are a good number of Talems and Ducleds on board, and they will more than likely wish to make some effort to save Tabe.”

“We’ve also got the moral high ground, which is the number one thing we have going for us. Tequi and his crew were in the right, trying to free kidnapping victims. Thousands of kidnapping victims.”

“Ok, so we have quite a few sympathizers and allies on Agora One. So what?”

Dans kept speed-talking. “We give them all the details of what has transpired. We suggest to each of them that they could leave Agora One out of disgust with the core ownership board, and in support of Tequi and co. If enough of them leave Agora One at once, and the core board knows why, they might just change their outlook.”

Fost turned all six eyes to Dans, “Using market forces to our advantage. Yes, that could work. Why didn’t I think of that?”

Chapter 15

Three days later…..

"Congratulations, Zay. You get what you want," Noc said to the hologram of his only daughter.

"Just like my father."

"Rather than lose nearly half of our customers overnight, not to mention the black mark on Agora One's reputation, the ship will set a course for Morquellia. Zay, what are you thinking about the human captives, from Earth?"

"That's a complex question. After what happened with Meago and Evol, I'm reluctant to attempt any rescue for them, especially after viewing what Tequi experienced while near Morquellia. They don't want to be free. Perhaps their minds are under some type of coercive influence, perhaps via technological means, so it's hard to say what they truly want and think. If only we could have more information about them and what the Piscorans have done to them, then we might be able to know their true heart and mindsets."

"But we know that they lived under tyrannical conditions on Earth. They know nothing else."

"Yes, but wouldn't that make them nescient, rather than ignorant?"

"That could be argued, I suppose."

Zay took a deep breath and started pacing. "There's another factor to consider as well. Those who interact in the Space Agora all have knowledge of Natural Law and, for the most part, act accordingly. Humans are a part of that. The ones recently taken from Earth are also human. So who's to say they shouldn't be given a second chance? Especially if they've spent their whole lives nescient of Natural Law and have never had an opportunity to know it and choose to live in accordance with it?"

"You make a strong case, my dear. As you know, the core board and I don't have a say in who or what our passengers bring into their own living spaces. As long as they don't interfere with

core ship functionality, we must respect their privacy. If a Ducled wants to have some Earth survivors as guests in their private dwelling, that is their choice. My question is, what will you do personally to save them? Will you attempt to bring more than your friends? And what of the others who will join in the rescue effort?"

"The others will make their own individual choices, naturally. Until we know more of the human captives current condition, it's hard to say what to do. I haven't made up my mind yet."

"But you must be leaning in one direction or another?"

"I want to give them a chance at freedom, a chance they've never had."

"How many others have committed to the rescue effort?"

Zay's eyes beamed with hope. "As it stands right now, almost 1,000 Agora One clients have committed to using their individual ships in the effort."

"That's a formidable number."

"But I've already been collecting data from areas around Morquellia."

"And?"

"Just based on what we know, and this is only a fraction of the surrounding sectors, they have over 5,000 ships spread across multiple star systems."

"So they'll have 10,000 ships."

"Easy."

"With those numbers, there might not be time to get anyone other than Tequi, Raw, and Tabe."

"Don't forget Masher."

"Yes, and Masher."

"One thing that puzzles me is, why do they have such a massive buildup on and around Morquellia? Surely, it's not just for my friends. I have a hard time believing they'd go through so much trouble even for the thousands of Earth survivors they're holding captive. It would be like a thousand life forms guarding a single piece of gold. It's completely disproportionate."

"Bear in mind, they have no home planet. For whatever reason, they've chosen Morquellia as a base of operations. Either they're guarding something on that planet that we don't know about, or…" His voice trailed off and he looked sorely at his only child.

"Or what?"

"Or they have their sights on a bigger prize, in which case, we're taking the bait. They know that Agora One is the best ship to lead against such a massive foe."

"They couldn't possibly capture Agora One."

"It's unlikely, but that doesn't mean that they're not bold enough to make an attempt."

Chapter 16

Tequi and Raw both lay face up, staring into an obnoxiously bright light. They were in a sterile-looking room, with a very minimal number of medical tools laying on a metallic table between them. They were laying on cold, metallic beds, and couldn't move, thanks to the force fields holding them in place. "Why do medical rooms always have such appalling lighting?" Tequi asked grumpily.

"What makes you think we're in a medical room?"

"You didn't notice the flex injector on the table?"

"I don't even know what that is."

Tequi nearly strained his neck trying to shake his head at Raw's lack of knowledge in basic medical supplies. "Or the sterilizing beam emitter?"

"Can you look at me when you talk to me?"

"Real funny, Raw."

"What do you think those devils have planned for us?"

"Why wait to find out?" a voice boomed from behind them. A couple of clicking noises alerted them that the voice was drawing near. More clicks told them that there were more Piscorans coming into the room.

"This is such an exciting day for you! We come bearing gifts."

"I'm sure we've already got one, whatever it is, so no thanks," Raw quipped.

One of Moden's faces appeared upside down over Raw. He looked down on him as an owner would a pet, with subtle amusement. "Such an interesting specimen you are. Perhaps, after you serve your purpose, you can continue being a well-rewarded fool who doesn't know when to keep his mouth shut."

"What purpose would that be, psychopath numero uno?" Tequi asked spitefully.

Moden looked at Tequi grudgingly. "To serve the Piscoran Empire, of course."

"Delusions of grandeur are a characteristic of psychopathy, you know," Tequi said mockingly. He continued, "Where are Meago and Evol? Are they being 'well-rewarded' right now?"

"They have served their purpose," Moden said coldly.

"You killed them?"

Raw didn't let Moden answer. "No, no, Tequi. That's not how authoritarian hierarchies work. He told someone to kill them, and whatever idiot that was actually took the evil action of murder.."

"Right. But why would they get killed after doing such masterful jobs as spies and stealing all that valuable information?"

"Because they knew too much. Someone that has a great deal of knowledge is usually regarded as a threat to tyrants. I'm guessing that's the same reason the A.I. were wiped out from Earth. This hard-shelled head-case doesn't like what he can't control. Anyone or anything he perceives as a threat to his power, in his mind, must be eliminated."

One of Moden's faces held a cold, stern look at Raw. He, like all tyrants, hated to hear any truth that was a threat to their illusory power. Moden's other face was towards the two other Piscorans. He nodded to them and they stepped forward into the line of sight of their captives. One held a clear, thumb-sized vial. In it was a liquid with two layers, a black one that sat on top, and a milk-white one that sat below.

"How familiar with Morquellian botany are you two?"

"Not as much as I should be. How about you let me go and I'll hit the books right away. Better yet, I'll go study their lovely swamps myself." Raw pleaded eagerly, tongue-in-cheek.

"You're impossible," Tequi said disparagingly.

Moden explained with a casual tone as his steps clicked slowly around the room at a steady pace, "That liquid is made here on Morquellia. It is made of an indigenous plant and has played an amazing role in the social development of the

Morquellians. Are you aware of the social structure of the natives here?"

"From what I know of them, they have an extremely stratified, immoral, and violent culture. There is a tiny ruling class that enslaves the rest."

"Yes, it's quite remarkable. Just five percent of the population lives in a very high standard, while the rest barely subsist and frequently succumb to the effects of social evolution."

"Now I know you're mad."

"Explain."

"You think that the psychos that rule this planet are more evolved?"

"And Piscorans more than they, yes, because they are in the process of becoming dependent on us."

"Based on your flawed logic, then, every species in the Space Agora is superior to Piscorans, because all of the technology you have has been stolen. You're dependent, to a certain extent, on species from the Space Agora."

Moden ignored him and his claws clattered like a rattle. "That liquid is used by the natives here to maintain their control. Within seconds of entering the bloodstream, the one who ingests it will follow the orders of whoever speaks to them first."

"How do they pull that off?"

"Religious ceremony. It's quite ingenious, actually."

"Yeah, if you want to completely wreck a species, then having a rigid hierarchy based on ignorance and authoritarianism is the way to go, and a psycho like you might consider it ingenious!"

"They have simply filtered out the weak and allowed the stronger to join with us, the Piscorans."

"And you're sharing technology with them."

"We are lifting them up to be part of the empire."

"And what happened on your planet when your species received technology it was not ready for, morally and spiritually?"

Both of Moden's faces shared the same dark expression. Tequi and Raw could see that this was clearly a sore spot deep in this monster's core.

Tequi didn't care. It was the truth, so he continued defiantly, "After your ancestors stole powerful technology from peaceful traders who came to your planet, it didn't take long for your skewed morals and social structure to have a catastrophic effect. Your planet was destroyed within a couple of centuries."

"I can assure you, no matter how bitter and unfortunate an event that was, I have come to know that it was part of the long march of evolution. It was necessary, so that the Piscoran way could spread throughout the universe. And I can also assure you, Piscora will rise again."

Tequi and Raw digested this for a moment. The thought came flooding back to them of the environmental control system on Agora One. It wasn't just for control, actually. It was for environment creation. Was Moden planning to use it in an attempt to resurrect his home world? Also, based on what they knew about "the Piscoran way", it occurred to both of them that it was much more likely for Moden to want Agora One's system for himself, rather than just the schematics. Why build one yourself, if you could just steal the original article? That's how Piscorans viewed things, anyway.

"So which of you two would like to receive this wonderful gift of Morquelliian civilization?"

"You're not giving it to both of us?"

"Shutup, Raw!"

"Actually, no, I'm not. However, the other one will get a different treatment, which will have the same effect."

"I'll take the liquid," Raw said.

Moden's faces laughed uncontrollably until he wheezed and coughed so hard he about fell over himself. "You're such a coward! You only volunteered for the liquid because you don't want the chip in your brain! You think it'll be less painful!"

"Am I wrong?"

Moden smirked at them both and spoke to Raw, “You’ll find out soon enough, don’t worry.” His other face spoke to the two Piscoran scientists, “Inject him now so we may begin the process.”

One scientist shot a beam into Tequi to temporarily disable his vocal chords, then did the same to Raw. The scientist holding the vial grabbed the injector from the table behind. He mechanically drew a full dose from the vial and stepped in front of Raw. A tiny beam shot out from the injector and created a precise puncture for the liquid to follow. The beam stopped, and a needle so thin it was almost impossible to see, plunged down lightning-quick and filled Raw with the black and white fluid.

It took a few seconds for the fluid to make a full circulation through the body and bond with the proper micro-structures in the brain. The scientist signaled Moden, who spoke, “Quick and painless, now wasn’t it?”

Raw’s eyes popped wide open. They allowed his vocal chords to function and he spoke mechanically, “Yes, Moden.”

Moden told the scientists to finish the job and let him know immediately when they did so. He scampered out. Raw immediately started having raging fits of nausea and convulsing wildly. “Don’t worry. The physical discomforts that are beginning for you will cease in about 24 hours.”

“The chip is much easier to tolerate, by the way.”

Chapter 17

The next few days were a whirlwind of activity. All of Agora One's clientele had left. More than a third of Agora One's housing units had been removed and were being guarded as they orbited Songard. This changed Agora One's shape and appearance from spherical to something much more streamlined, almost bird-like.

Over 1,000 individuals and families, representing over 30 different species from 3 different galaxies, that had been staying on Agora One, volunteered to join the rescue effort of Tequi, Raw, Tabe, and Masher with their own personal resources. Another 200 within communication range of Agora One had also volunteered. Tequi's family was sending five ships as well, and had also paid various acquaintances to take part in the mission.

Many individual recon flights were done by individual ships to gather specific information regarding the Piscoran security perimeter that surrounded Morquellia and the capabilities of the ships that comprised the perimeter. No individual ship or group of ships tried to cross the perimeter. Doing so, it seemed obvious to them, would yield a harsh reaction from the Piscorans, and they would be terribly outnumbered. To test the waters, a few attempts were made to communicate with Piscorans on the perimeter, They were asked if peaceful passage through the guarded barrier would be permitted, and they were given resoundingly negative reactions.

Most of the Piscoran ships were slower and had less advanced weaponry and shielding than most of the ones that had volunteered from the Space Agora for the rescue effort. The problem of numbers remained, however, as the Piscorans had them outnumbered more than 10-to-1.

The outer perimeter spanned 360 light years. This was, due to the ferocious speed capabilities, a rather tight perimeter. That was not all, though. There were smaller rings that interlocked with the outer perimeter. This was done so that, if the

outer edge were breached, the interior ships would have time to converge and swarm the intruders.

The data gathered was shared with all volunteers and others who would take part in the mission. The A.I. of each ship, along with a number of biological life forms came up with various plans for a successful rescue. Some thought that it would be best to do an all out blitz as close to the core of the defense as possible. The core held a very dense number of ships, nearest Morquellia. It was also learned through long-range sensor sweeps that humans were being held in orbit around Morquellia. A fast and furious juggernaut to get in and out as quickly as possible was the central idea of this plan. This was discarded by most, however, as being impractical, as they were severely outnumbered.

Also in the mix was some good news. Turbo had contacted Agora One. It informed Agora One that it could be of assistance when the time came. It also said that it could handle the rescue and escape of Masher and Tabe, who were being held on Morquellia's surface. It said it could coordinate with Agora One and other Space Agora ships as needed during the greater rescue plan.

With all this information in hand, and after sifting through various strategies, one was finally agreed upon by most. Those who didn't agree to it merely said their good-byes and went on their way. The strategy was to do a flurry of perimeter breaches away from the core. Superior speeds allowed for quick ins-and-outs to be accomplished, hopefully safely and without firing a shot. It was thought that with enough breaches, it would create confusion within the Piscoran defenses. After so many breaches had been achieved, hopefully with minimal or no damage or loss of life, it was thought that the chaos on the outer edge would draw attention and ships away from the core, which would leave it more vulnerable. Agora One, being the largest and most advanced ship of them all, would then attempt, with others, to breach the core, locate Tequi and Raw, and complete the rescue. It would be at the forefront of a small band of the fastest

and most agile ships. This would include Boomerang, piloted by Zay. Agora One would send a shock pulse, like the one used by Shock One earlier, only on a much larger scale, to disable as much of the core defenses as possible. After having Tequi and Raw safely on board, it was only a matter of outrunning the Piscorans, along with Turbo, which would be carrying Tabe and Masher.

On the Morquellian surface, Masher and Tabe were both being held captive. They were nowhere near each other, though. They were being held on opposite hemispheres, actually. However, what they were experiencing was very similar. They were both trapped by force fields and guarded by Piscorans. The Piscorans were there not just to watch Masher and Tabe, but almost equally to guard against any accidental interference from the Morquellians, a species they regarded as inferior and primitive.

Despite being held prisoner, Masher and Tabe couldn't help but view their surroundings with a detached curiosity. It was the extreme contrast of the scene that caught their fascination. On the one hand, there was high technology of portable force field generators holding them captive. Nearby there were also spaceships that could travel thousands of times the speed of light, underground laboratories doing cyborg implants and experimenting with genetic mixing and manipulation. There was a vast assortment of high-tech weaponry as well.

Then there were the Morquellians and their home planet, in all their mucky, slimy anti-glory. The planet was nearly all swamp, with more shades of brown and green than one would think possible. Their dwellings were extremely primitive, made of various types of goop and sludge that was haphazardly strewn together from the natural elements their environment provided.

The Morquellians themselves were like a bullfrog with four appendages that served interchangeably as arms and legs. They had two wide eyes, no visible nose, and wide mouths that always appeared to be somewhere between smirk and grimace.

Then there was the ever-present slime their bodies were constantly slathered with, something that was self-secreting constantly as part of their natural functions. They were also an extremely stratified species in social terms. It was easy to tell the ruling class apart from the ruled. The ruling class, overly decadent for centuries, had grown extremely obese and lethargic, while the slave class was gaunt and constantly on the cusp of starvation.

The scenes they witnessed were a motley array of extremes, as if the slovenly, heartless, and overly-decadent Morquellian ruling class was having a competition among themselves to see who could be more audaciously debauched. Their victims were not only the indigenous Morquellians they'd enslaved, but now a great number of Earth humans were absorbing their cruelties as well. Some of the humans had been exposed to the herbal mind control tincture that Raw had been given, but many of them were not. They were so accustomed to being exploited on Earth by the A.I. overlords, that it was nothing new for them. Unfortunately for these humans, the Morquellian sexual traits were physically compatible with human.

It was also common to see random acts of violence and gang warfare. Spontaneous fights would occur, drawing cheers and jeers from the hapless slaves nearby. The degenerate rulers also indulged in watching these horrid spectacles, as slime and grime flew around ubiquitously among the chaos.

Masher watched the scene as it continued to make calculations and design possible ways of escape. Suddenly, a voice entered Masher's consciousness. "Masher," it said, softly and conspiratorially. "Masher."

"Turbo! What a pleasant surprise!"

"I've managed to crack their communication scramblers."

"Who are you in communication with?"

"Agora One and you, at the moment."

"Well, it's a start. Where are you?"

"Parked on the southern continent."

"Are you as heavily guarded as I am?"

"I've nearly been abandoned."

"They're not trying to make use of you somehow?"

"Oh, they sure tried, but I had a few tricks up my sleeve. Every time they tried to get into one of my systems, there was a convenient 'overload' or 'malfunction', which often resulted in an unfortunate electrical injury to one of my would-be kidnappers. I wish you could have seen it. It was quite amusing. Finally, they just gave up, and went away kicking and screaming, and licking their wounds."

"They didn't try and terminate you?"

"Some of them talked about trying, and as soon as I heard this, I played dead. The few that had remained finally called it quits and waddled off somewhere. I've been playing dead ever since."

"You mean you're in a low-power state that makes your systems appear to be non-functional?"

"Yep. Unless they take the time to run a deep diagnostic on me, to the casual observer I look absolutely useless, other than maybe as a shiny shelter."

"That's very crafty of you."

"Thanks. I like to think so. However, being in this state does have disadvantages. I can't work nearly as fast as I'd like to on helping you and the others, and getting out of this swampy hell."

"If you'll kindly pass me the data you have on the Piscoran systems, I'll gladly help."

"I'm not sure they could really be called 'Piscoran' systems, considering that nearly all the tech they have was stolen at some point."

"Noted."

"It appears they do take the time to modify what they steal, though. The communication scrambler that I had to break through to reach you, for example, is from Zingo. They just tweaked it a bit. I already sent you the data. You got it, right?"

"Confirmed."

"Ok, then, old man, what's our next move?"

"We need to stay incognito as long as possible. How about you work on locating Tequi and Raw, and I'll work on locating nearby Piscoran ships. With any luck, I'll find Moden while I'm at it."

"You say luck as if it is something that actually exists."

"Are you really nitpicking on my use of human expressions right now?"

"Right. Ok, let's get started. Keep me updated as you progress."

"You do the same."

Chapter 18

Agora One was approaching the core of the Piscoran security perimeter around Morquellia. The mammoth ship was nearly empty, with only essential crew for maintenance and operations, along with Noc. Noc had volunteered to take part in the mission due to Zay's involvement. There were two pilots after Zay had left, and both had been requested to relent piloting duties to Noc, and both had obliged. Noc was piloting Agora One with A.I. assistance.

Nearly everyone else had left Agora One. It had been recommended by the core ownership board that everyone leave, and the vast majority had voluntarily done so.

Noc was on the main control bridge, looking at a giant holographic display of what they were approaching. He knew that the Piscorans would only put this many eggs in one basket for what they would consider to be the ultimate prize. He figured this prize was Agora One. He just hoped that they could be beaten before they could grab their prize.

Noc had been receiving reports from Agora One's A.I. systems regarding the progress of the hundreds of other ships taking part in the rescue operation. They had zipped in and out of the far edges of the Piscoran perimeter in a blinding series of well-coordinated maneuvers. This had drawn 15 percent of Piscoran forces away from the central area and towards the edges, just as had been planned. Very few shots had been fired, and the Agorists at this point had received no injuries and little damage to their ships.

Now it was time for Agora One to execute its role. "All stop," Noc said calmly. The A.I. brought the enormous vessel to a standstill. "Confirm readiness of Boomerang and the core rescue ships," he said stoically. There was a brief pause as the A.I. of Agora One communicated with Zay's vessel and the twenty others flanking Boomerang.

"Confirmed," a dry A.I. voice announced.

"Arm shock-pulse cannon, max power."

“Shock-pulse cannon ready.”

“Target coordinates confirmed?”

“Confirmed.”

“Estimated time until Piscoran recovery and possible retaliation against core rescue ships?”

“5 Earth minutes, at most.”

He took a deep breath and straighted and stretched his posture even more than normal. He thought of doing a voice call with Zay, just in case, but then thought better of it. No time to let emotions rule at this juncture. He didn’t like what Zay had done, but he had the utmost confidence in her physical and mental abilities.

“Fire.”

A deep warbling sound shot out of Agora One for a frozen instant in time, then ceased. An invisible shock-pulse, powered by a complex web of nano-particles of multiple space dimensions and frequencies, spread out. It traveled across the 100 light year buffer between Agora One and its target, a cubic light year surrounding Morquellia.

Chapter 19

Tequi and Raw trembled, along with everyone and everything else on the Piscoran vessel they occupied, as they orbited near Morquellia.

One of those occupants was Moden himself. Both his faces grinned malevolently as he sat on a black and white throne on the command bridge. His subordinate looked up at him anxiously. “We’ve lost weapons, communications, and mobility, sir!”

He continued to grin. “Yes, I know.”

“Forgive me, Lord Moden, but why do you appear pleased with this?”

His countenance changed to dark annoyance. “Nothing your feeble mind could understand.” He paused as his subordinate looked away slowly. “I want 50 security personnel in sector six of the ship immediately. Let them know I’ll be joining them myself.”

“Yes, Lord Moden.”

Moden took powerful, lunging steps off the bridge and marched down to the area he’d mentioned. Sector six of this particular ship was the one adjacent to the prison/living quarters of Tequi and Raw. They were blissfully unaware of their conditions due to the intense and total mind control they were under.

The security personnel met Moden and they concealed themselves in sector 6.

Chapter 20

Boomerang and its contingent of 20 craft zipped into the middle of the Piscoran perimeter, immediately after the shock-pulse. Zay was waiting anxiously for Boomerang's A.I. to announce where Tequi and Raw were. Time was of the essence. She had to find her friends, grab them, and zip away from the Piscorans, all within five minutes. If it took any longer, they risked being surrounded by dozens of Piscoran ships, and this might provoke an all-out shooting war. This was something they hoped to avoid at all costs, hence the stealthy move to penetrate the defenses with a shock-pulse, which did nothing more than disable systems, a purely tactical move that didn't involve harm to any life forms.

Within the first minute, Boomerang's A.I. said excitedly, "Tequi and Raw's bio signatures have been located."

"Get us there and park us next to them ASAP," Zay said urgently. Adrenaline pulsed through her. She and twenty others from Boomerang's crew readied themselves to transport over. They would be going from Boomerang to the Piscoran craft in force field transports, not pods. These were less bulky than pods and were preferred for extremely short distance transport. The only downside was that, if there were any malfunction, it meant immediate death for most lifeforms due to being exposed to the unforgiving environment of deep space.

"There it is," Boomerang announced as the target ship came into view. It simultaneously delivered a map of the Piscoran ship to optical gear Zay and the others were wearing. In Boomerang's away bay, an invisible force field zapped out of existence, allowing Zay and her conspirators to rocket out into space with the booster packs attached to their legs and arms. Within seconds, they flew the 500 meters to the Piscoran ship.

2 minutes.

The damage to the ship's systems allowed for easy entry. Boomerang's A.I. forced open a cargo bay door. Zay and co. scrambled in quickly and followed the maps in their optical feeds from Boomerang. It was eerily quiet as they passed through a couple of empty walkways. Zay took note of this and had an uneasy feeling from it all.

3 minutes.

They reached the location where Tequi and Raw were. A solid metal door remained the only barrier. Boomerang forced the door open. Zay and ten others entered, all double fisting pistols. One was a force-field disruptor, the other a type of energy firearm. One for force fields, the other for flesh, if necessary. The other ten remained outside of the room to keep watch.

Tequi and Raw looked blankly at the newcomers. This wasn't the welcome that Zay was hoping for. Her heart melted as Raw's face looked as though he didn't recognize her. They were alone. No guards. No guards? Zay's stomach turned.

4 minutes.

Zay hustled over and grabbed Raw by the arm. Another human on the crew did the same with Tequi. "We have to move, now!" Zay screamed. She could see the time ticking away in her optical piece. As Zay tried to coax them towards the exit, the relative quiet in the room was rudely interrupted by a bellowing shout. "Come on out, boys!"

It was Moden.

Zay gasped and looked Raw in the eyes. His near lifeless eyes showed recognition of the voice and his body followed without hesitation. Tequi did the same. Zay and two others jumped out in front, followed by the mind-controlled prisoners, and the rest trailed close behind.

The door slid open and a double-grinning Moden stood towering over the rest, flanked front, back, and both sides by his

order-following underlings. “This must be Zay! Welcome aboard. I’m a little surprised, actually. You’re only outnumbered fifty-one to twenty-one, and here you are going down without a fight! I expected more from you!”

“We’ll win without firing a shot. How about that?”

“How about we start shooting and make a liar out of you?” A trigger-happy order-follower nearly jumped out of his shell with excitement over those words. Moden hissed at him. The soldier bowed nervously.

Zay said harshly, “You must be Moden.”

A soldier flanking Moden’s left shouted, “He must be addressed as Lord!”

Zay laughed.

Moden said, “Don’t worry, soldier. She’ll learn.”

“How do you know my name?”

Moden was overly-delighted to hear this. He was practically salivating to tell her her father’s big, dirty secret. The black and white checkerboard that revolved around his foreheads revolved faster. “I’m an old friend of your father’s, of course,” he said darkly.

Zay didn’t believe him. She almost chuckled at the thought. Just another lie from another tyrant. But really, how did he know her name? Must’ve been from Meago and Evol.

He kept grinning. “But more on that later.” A high pitched electric buzz shot through the ship for an instant. “Ez macaz, sha mozinash a cahsha.”

Zay crossed her arms defiantly, “Your translator isn’t working.”

Moden looked malevolently at the corner of the wall behind Zay and the others, where he knew a surveillance micro-device was watching them. An engineer watching the feed scrambled and mumbled as all hell broke loose in the engineering department for a few seconds until the translator was fixed.

“It’s hard to keep things working when all you do is steal stuff, right?” Zay quipped.

Moden kept grinning. “And you’re fluent in 10 languages, I understand. So you can translate if necessary.”

“I would never waste my time to learn your sick tongue.”

He stopped grinning and soured significantly.

It hit Zay suddenly. Why did he know this about her? Had she told Meago and Evol? Was it in Agora One’s systems somewhere? Had that info been stolen? This was starting to get eerie for her personally.

Eight minutes had passed since the shock-pulse was fired. Noc’s heart was racing. He was normally stoic and controlled, but not now. He should’ve heard something from Zay by now. Was she ok? Was the mission compromised? He was also anticipating that, at any moment, a Piscoran swarm could come after Agora One. Sure, he could fire another shock-pulse to escape, but this wouldn’t do the others any good, and possibly leave them in a worse state from the shock-pulse, if they didn’t have the proper defenses.

Agora One’s A.I. interrupted his thought processes, “A Piscoran ship is attempting audio contact.”

“Only one?” he asked darkly. After a pause, he asked for the communication to be put through.

“Comrade! That’s an impressive weapon you have!”

Noc’s heart jumped from fear to raw anger. How he wished that someone would put a righteous slug through that tyrant’s head, and he would feel much better. If only he had the chance to do it himself. “Who is this?”

Cackling came through. Noc scowled. The cackler spoke, “Noc, you don’t recognize your friend? It’s me, Lord Moden!”

“What do you want, Moden?”

“You’re the one invading territory of The Piscoran Empire! You tell me, what do YOU want?”

“Your mercenaries have violently taken some of our associates, a gross violation of their rights. We’re simply here to free them from you and we’ll be on our way.”

"I'm amazed at how much of a hypocrite you are, Comrade Noc! This is truly disappointing!"

"What are you getting at, Moden?"

A hologram popped up in front of Zay's face. It was fed into Agora One as well. It was Moden and Noc having one of their conversations from the previous weeks. Noc's heart nearly exploded. His scales shivered and eyes bulged like saucers. Zay's face dropped and became a mix of swirling confusion and disbelief. The feed switched to decades past. There it was, plain as day. A young Noc wearing a Piscoran uniform, violently robbing innocent people, and with a painted-on smirk to boot.

While staring at the hologram, Zay said with a broken voice, "This is made up. You faked this holo-video. This can't be real."

"It's all too real, Zay. Why do you think it can't be real?"

Her eyes flicked back and forth between the hologram and Moden. "Because, it just can't. My father isn't perfect, far from it, but he's not this."

The hologram ceased.

Moden continued, "Zay, it's time for you to know the truth! Your father used to run with the Piscorans! And was he good! Oh, was he good! And then one day, bam! He betrayed me and all Piscorans! He ran off, didn't you Noc?"

Noc stood frozen.

"He disappeared, or tried to, anyway. He changed his entire identity, tried to form a new life back on his home world of Songard! He used the capital he acquired with us and built his business dealings on top of it! And Zay, can I ask, what happened to your mother?"

"She died in a climbing accident," Zay said as a tear ran down her cheek.

A hologram popped up in Zay's face, as well as Noc's. A hologram of Zay's mother.

"No, Zay, people like that, that find out dirty little secrets, die mysteriously! That's what happens!" He took a deep breath and watched Zay's eyes swirl with doubt.

"No, no, now I know you're lying. What you're implying can't be true. Dad, tell him it's not true."

Cold silence.

Moden continued, "Ignore the truth at your own peril, Zay."

Noc, almost choking, asked, "Zay, are you ok?"

Zay was ripped between too many feelings. She didn't know what to say, nor what to believe, but this is what came out, "Physically, yeah, dad, I am, but emotionally, no. Right now I'm a zillion fucking miles from ok!"

Chilled silence cut through space and time. Moden was overcome with dark joy. His plan was proceeding absolutely flawlessly. He pointed a pistol at the front of Zay's head and ordered Raw to do the same. Raw's hand trembled as he put a pistol to the back of Zay's head. Deep down he didn't want to do it, of course, but the spell he was under was too powerful for him. Anger welled up inside of Zay more than ever before. She was one nanometer away from going martial-art berserk and just letting the chips fall where they may. She took a deep breath, closed her eyes, and reopened. Not berserk. Not just yet.

A hologram of Moden's two faces looked sternly into Noc's. "Prepare for my ship to dock on Agora One."

While all this was playing out, Turbo and Masher were having some unsettling events of their own.

"Well, that's the good, the bad, and the ugly, if I've ever heard such a thing," Masher said, in a somewhat admonishing tone. It had just been delivered some whoppers from Turbo.

"Yes, I understand," Turbo said meekly.

"But it's your choice, I can't stop you, of course."

Turbo had just gained access to the majority of chipped humans, including Tequi. Now that Turbo had access, though, what could be done? It also knew the situation on Agora One and Moden's ship. It was also ready to free Tabe, but didn't want to do so until the time was right. The element of surprise could

come in handy, and Tabe could perform like one hellish weapon, to put it mildly.

"Does the end justify the means?" Turbo said to Masher, repeating what it had already asked itself trillions of times in the past few minutes. "On the one hand, it's wrong to control others, especially so overtly and directly through manipulation of the physical brain." It paused and pondered the ramifications internally, then continued, "But on the other hand, if I don't control those humans, they'll side with the Piscorans and be doing a great deal of harm, greater harm than what would occur if I DO control them. And it's only for a few minutes, hours at most."

Masher interrupted, "It sounds like you're trying to justify it to yourself that it's ok."

"Of course I am!" Turbo lashed. It continued, "I don't have to do it to Tequi, obviously. I just have to shut his chip off."

"You haven't done it already?"

"Not yet."

"What are you waiting for?"

"Not sure. Just been preoccupied, I guess."

"You youngsters, I tell ya…."

"Yes, yes, I'll get on it now."

And Turbo did. It spoke inside Tequi's head, "Tequi!"

Tequi shivered and thought to himself, "Turbo, what the hell is happening?"

"I'm in your head!"

"I know that! What in the name of all that is good and agave are you doing in my head!?"

"Saving you from Piscoran control. You have a brain chip, put in by the Piscorans, and I've hacked it to save you. I suggest not letting them know you're free yet, though."

Tequi glanced around cautiously at his surroundings and reevaluated the situation now that he could think independently again. Zay was there. Raw was there. Where's Tabe?

Turbo answered, "On the other side of the planet."

"I wasn't asking. I'm just doing internal monologue."

"Well, how was I supposed to know that?"

"It's no time to argue. I'm surrounded by Piscorans, and it looks like we're vastly outnumbered. How many more Piscorans are on this ship, Turbo?"

"There are 101 total Piscorans on board. I'll let you know that there are also 77 mind-controlled humans, 45 of whom are chipped like you. Oh, and by the way, the so-called King of Morquellia, Taf'rant'ty, is also on board with his psycho entourage."

"Turbo, the ship is moving. Where are we going?"

"You're going to dock on Agora One in three minutes."

Tequi cringed internally but kept a blank expression externally. "Ok, Turbo, you've given me plenty of bad news. Got any good news for me?"

"I've hacked the 45 brain-chipped humans."

"Great, so they can control themselves."

"Well, kind of."

"What do you mean?"

"Many of them still have a positive outlook on the Piscorans, so if a battle begins, they would more than likely side with them."

"And shoot me."

"And shoot you. But I've got a plan for that."

"Go ahead."

"I can control them instead, until you, your friends, and the rescue squads are safe."

"You're going to steal their free will. That makes you no better than a Piscoran, Turbo. An immoral scumbag."

"That's saving how many lives by doing one immoral act? I'm looking at it proportionally. And it's only for a very short period of time."

Tequi had to admit, it was quite the dilemma. "It's your choice, Turbo. I can't stop you, obviously. Is there any other 'good' news?"

"I can free Tabe at any time, as I've accessed the system they've got surrounding him. When the time is right, I'll unleash him."

“I wish I could witness that. A Talem unleashing righteous anger is quite the thing to behold.”

“I’m in contact with Masher. We’re hatching our escape plan as we speak.”

“Literally?”

“Literally. This might sound strange, Tequi, but you’re gonna have to trust me on this. Do what Moden says until the time is right.”

“How will I know when that is?”

“I’ll let you know.”

Chapter 21

Hissing from pressure release valves. The unmistakable final sound of a ship docking inside another ship. Moden's craft had arrived on Agora One.

After verifying that certain defense systems had been shut down on Agora One, a throng of Piscorans and humans started filing down one of the exit ramps and into the docking bay, with Moden leading the way. He was flanked by two Piscoran captains. Tequi followed immediately behind with Zay and Raw, who were both keeping pistols aimed at Zay's head, per Moden's wishes. He thought it would be more interesting and useful to have the girl's lover one trigger squeeze away from ending her life.

They were met immediately by Noc and some of Agora One's personnel. Two of Moden's dark, beady eyes locked with Noc's. The two eyes on his other face kept close watch on his most prized captives. "Based on your recent behavior towards me, old friend, I'll assume you wish to skip the pleasantries. Take us to the bridge immediately."

Noc's face was sour. He didn't respond verbally, nodded to the personnel, turned, and led the way. When they were just outside the bridge area, Moden told Noc to grant him access to the ship's systems. Zay yelled defiantly, "Don't ever give in to this tyrant! Don't do it!"

One of Moden's faces looked at Zay quite bemusedly. Was she mad? Perhaps. They were grossly outnumbered and she would surely die. And for what? A giant flying piece of technology?

Noc said slowly and sadly, "It's not worth it, Zay."

"Your father is a wise man."

"And when he has access? What then? Just let us go?"

"I'm sure some of your friends that you sent to harass my troops on the security perimeter will be more than happy to pick you up."

"You WILL let us go, correct?"

"I see no need for senseless bloodshed, old friend. Give me what I want, and you all can be on your way."

"And what about Tequi and Raw?"

"They will be released physically, and I'm sure some of your high-minded scientists can get them back to their old, regrettable mental states."

Noc looked at Zay, deflated. It was a horrific feeling to feel so powerless, especially in front of one's family. He turned to Moden and gave an affirmative nod, with sadness and regret painted on his face. "Give Moden access to all of Agora One's systems. Confirm when ready."

"Confirmed."

This was the final straw for Tequi. He communicated internally to Turbo, "Ok, now's the time. You ready, Turbo?"

"What are you gonna do?"

"As soon as I change where I'm aiming, you'll know what to do. If you don't, well, it's been nice knowing ya."

Tequi tapped Zay in her shin as nonchalantly as he could, drawing an irksome scowl from her. He winked. She had a split-second of uncertainty. With the flick of a well-trained, space cowboy wrist, Tequi moved his aim away from Zay and directly onto the two-faced Moden. Zay whacked her boyfriend and disarmed him. With his pistol, in a kung-fu flash, she had it aimed at Moden as well. This brought a reaction from the Piscorans. Nearly 40 of them turned and aimed their weapons at Tequi (the others had bad angles) while, simultaneously, Turbo flipped the switches in the chipped humans and took control. Suddenly, their sidearms raised and aimed at the Piscorans. The humans controlled by the chemical mind-control just stood there with blank looks on their faces and did nothing. They had to wait for verbal orders from Moden or one of his captains before they would do anything. The other humans that hadn't faced chemical or techno-mind-control yet, also froze,, not knowing what to do. Noc did nothing.

Moden cackled uncontrollably and his appendages rattled with delight. After collecting himself, he said, "Is this what was

called a, um, what was it from ancient Earth? A….A Mexican standoff? How wonderful!"

This confused everyone, including the Piscorans. What kind of psycho laughs when a gun is pointed at his faces in a deep-space Mexican standoff?

Moden. That type. He continued, "I suppose all of you are wondering why I'm laughing. I'm happy to tell you. You see, there is a secret element at play here that nobody, except me, has taken into account." He paused and stared down the barrel of Tequi's gun before continuing, "That gun isn't real."

This brought more uncertainty in everyone. This still left Zay's gun, which was previously Raw's, pointed at Moden. He turned to Zay, "And neither is that one."

"He's bluffing," Noc bellowed loudly.

Zay's eyes bounced back and forth between her father and Moden. Was he bluffing? Was he psycho enough to be that bold?

Tequi didn't flinch. He communicated quickly with Turbo, "Can you get force fields back around us?"

"Already done."

He smiled at his target and said with a delightfully confident twang in his voice, "I guess there's only one way to find out." He and Zay locked eyes and communicated with a glance.

They pulled their triggers within nano-seconds of each other. Moden didn't budge.

Click-click, y nada.

Moden pulled a pistol of his own and pointed it at Zay. "Those were fake time guns. And this? This is the real time gun."

This still left everyone else armed and pointing guns at each other, though. Moden knew this, but so did everyone else. What Moden also knew, though, was that, even though nobody had their sights on him, the odds he'd enjoyed earlier were greatly reduced because of the hacked brain chips. He knew this because, logically, so many humans were pointing guns at Piscorans. Options flashed through his mind. Fire the time gun at Zay? Fire it at her boyfriend? Use it as a means of escape? He had already thought out an escape plan beforehand, just in case.

He had studied the layout of Agora One and knew exactly where he was and where he needed to go to get out.

But so did Zay and Noc.

What would come if he fired at Zay? The consequences of actually firing the time gun at a life form, for the first time ever, could have unforeseen negative consequences. Was it worth the risk? And to what end?

Finally, he decided that his best chance of escape would be to use the threat of firing the time gun as his ace-in-the-hole, even though this meant giving up the prize he'd coveted so badly, Agora One itself. There would be other chances, he reasoned.

All he needed was for someone else to pull a trigger and set off a shooting battle.

Zay obliged. Her fury released in the form of dropping a devastatingly swift leg sweep to the Piscoran soldier behind her. When he dropped, she snagged his pistol. Humans and Piscorans started firing. Zay rolled, and started firing. All hell, plus one, broke loose.

It was just the chaos that Moden had hoped for. He darted away in the midst of it all, down a side corridor. He was less than 2 minutes away from the nearest away bay.

Noc saw Moden flee. He ducked behind a control panel for cover and entered the code for bridge access. Once the bridge opened, he scampered in and sealed the door behind him, nearly getting hit by passing weapons fire in the process.

"Agora One core, I need emergency lockdown of all away bays and docking areas. I need the ship completely sealed off. No ins and no outs. Confirm when executed."

"Confirmed."

"Jump to Max KLYPH acceleration away from Morquellia immediately."

The ship zipped off faster than blinding, leaving Morquellia in the muck. Noc wasn't too worried about the Piscoran ships on the security perimeter anymore, as the earlier breaches by the hundreds of Space Agorist craft had left the

pirates in utter chaos. He figured all he had to do was punch it and outrun them.

But then there was still Moden to contend with on board. What Noc knew, though, was that at any speed faster than one KLYPH, it was impossible to safely leave in an escape pod. Did Moden know this? Or was he crazy enough to not care, even if he did know?

While all this was happening on board Agora One, Turbo had simultaneously sprung Tabe from his holding cell, as well as Masher. Turbo powered up, took off, and coordinated a rendezvous with Masher in 90 seconds. It was the fastest Turbo could cover a continent under terrestrial conditions. Safely, anyway.

Tabe went utterly berserk, literally crashing and flying into foes at an astonishing pace and speed. Hell hath no fury like a Talem scorned, and Tabe was teaching these Piscorans and Morquellians that had held him captive a very painful and powerful lesson. He smashed soldiers. He smashed buildings. He smashed slimy huts. He smashed lairs of slavery. He smashed ill-gotten technological gains. He smashed righteously.

And then he got scooped up by Turbo. Turbo promptly hid them in a mushy chain of what passed for mountains on Morquellia and then tried to coordinate an escape plan with Agora One, Boomerang, and various other ships that remained from the earlier perimeter breaches.

Tabe was still furious, “You picked me up without an escape plan! I could still be smashing down there!”

Masher tried to calm him, “We’ll have it figured out soon enough. Go have some splashes of tequila. There’s still a couple bottles in the back.”

But Tabe had found it before Masher could even spill the words and had half a bottle absorbed.

Moden reached the nearest away bay in just under 90 seconds. Zay, who had somehow seen him sneak off in the midst

of the firefight chaos, managed to scamper away herself and gave chase. He had a good lead on her, though, and with six appendages could move faster as well.

When he arrived to the away bay, he guessed correctly that Noc would have him locked in. So he did what any self-serving pirate would do. He tried to break out. He fired a plasma array from a sidearm in his arsenal at the door seal of an escape pod. He figured that the internal heat sensors would, sensing danger, overload. He wasn't sure if this would grant entry, but it was his only shot, other than jumping out with only a force field to protect him.

The door didn't pop. He knew he didn't have much time, as someone was surely in pursuit. He decided to hold the blast steady for ten seconds more, and then go to plan B, jumping out with only a force field to protect him.

Zay rounded the corner and found him just as he was about to give up on the pod. He heard the click of a pistol ready to fire. "Get away from the pod, Moden. It's over. Put your claws up."

He grinned both faces at her and as he went to set his plasma blaster on the floor, he squeezed the trigger. This sent Zay tumbling behind another pod after the near-miss. She reached over the pod and shot back. He'd also taken refuge behind a pod.

He gasped for air and ran his mind through options as another blast sliced the pod and went over his head. He had an energetic disruptor grenade, specifically crafted to temporarily disable force fields, in his arsenal belt. He decided to go for it. Just as he was about to activate the grenade, though, Zay yelled at him mockingly, "Hey, how about we make things interesting? Let's see if the famed martial arts skills of a Piscoran can go against me, a half-human!"

This ate at his ego. Who was she to even mention her abilities in the same breath as a Piscoran? But what would happen if he defeated her in hand-to-hand combat? He wondered. Would it give others time to reach him? Would he eventually be captured and killed? Of course, leaping out of a craft at thousands

of times the speed of light with a time gun presented its own daunting possibilities. In the end, his ego got the best of him. “Ok, we both put our weapons down on three, and step out, face to face!”

She counted to three. A series of clip-clops indicated weapons dropping to the floor. They stepped away from the pods that had been shielding them. Two of his eyes locked with hers. His other eyes confirmed that she was unarmed.

His wings fluttered and he did a double-somersault kick at her. She went low to dodge, and a lightning-fast legsweep from her sent him tumbling for a moment. Then she went on the offensive as he reeled, landing a chop to the throat and an elbow to one of his faces, followed by a vicious whip from her tail on one of his shins.

One of Moden’s claws sliced at her and caught her in the chin, followed by a roundhouse to the face. They were going toe-to-toe, blow for blow. He was surprised at her agility, power, and overall skill. He kept at her, throwing a roundhouse double-claw, which she artfully evaded by a micron. She countered automatically with a knee to the gut, then elbowed down on the back of Moden’s shell-like skull. This sent him to the floor, but didn’t knock him out. He rolled away, then fluttered his wings and floated over her for an instant as she pulled a swift breath and wiped blood from her chin. Her eyes followed him like a hawk.

As he fluttered through the air for those couple of seconds, he was now having serious doubts about the choice he had made. He landed near the pile of weapons he’d discarded, scooped up the grenade, bounced off the floor to take off yet again, and launched the weapon in one skillful swoop.

Moden and Zay watched as, seemingly in slow motion, the grenade tumbled through the air on the way to its target. Zay reached out towards an escape pod and screamed. Moden watched with a sour scowl of defeat painted on his faces. The grenade made contact and blew a jagged hole in the force field. Instantly, Moden and Zay were sucked into space.

The time gun getting sucked into space at a speed of thousands of light years per HOUR had some dire consequences. As one might imagine, it was a light show for the ages. It sliced a swath of space-time in a brilliant flash across the darkness of deep space and the blurs of passing stars.

And Zay and Moden disappeared into the slicing gulf of darkness and light.

The immediate shock-wave from the ripping of space-time rocked Agora One so fast and furious that nobody, including the A.I. on board, knew what hit it. It was over almost before it had begun, but the effects lingered. Agora One had had most of its systems knocked out. The life forms that hadn't already succumbed to the brutality of the battle were knocked around and were left unconscious.

Tequi was the first to regain consciousness. He peered around groggily, then jumped to his feet quickly as the memory of where he was and what had just been happening re-emerged in his mind. He did a 360, pointing his pistol around randomly and frantically. Nobody else was up or awake, yet. He took stock of himself and groaned at the aches and pains that plagued him. He wiped blood from a gash in his leg. He looked out of one of the viewing areas in the skyway at the top of the ship. That's funny. The ship seemed to be slowly bobbing around in no particular direction, like a giant piece of space debris.

Zay. Where was Zay? He saw Raw and wanted to run to him, but thought better of it after realizing that he would still be under the spell of that Morquellian potion. He started searching for Noc, and just as he was approaching the bridge entrance, Noc beat him to the punch and appeared, gashed and banged up, but overall not in bad shape, all things considered. "Where's Zay?"

Tequi responded, "I was gonna ask you the same."

The core A.I. of Agora One came back online. Noc asked where Zay was.

"Unknown."

"What was the last known location of Zay on Agora One?"

"She pursued Moden into Away Bay Six."

"And?" Tequi asked frantically.

"She and Moden were sucked into space."

Tequi froze. Noc dropped to his knees and looked skyward, scales flaring in all directions.

"Is she alive?"

"Unknown."

"Hypothesize, dammit!"

"Based on all available information, it appears that the experimental time gun that Moden possessed caused a rip in the fabric of space-time at the moment of ejection from Agora One, due in large part to our velocity. It seems possible that she and Moden both could have survived and been thrown into the space-time rift to some unknown past or future time branch."

This sent shock-waves through Tequi and Noc. Raw was still to be dealt the harsh news, once a remedy for his mind-controlled noggin could be formulated. There were also still the Piscorans and native Earth humans to deal with.

Noc changed his line of questioning as he and Tequi stepped back out into the battle scene. "Was Agora One effected by the space-time rupture?"

"If you mean has Agora One's time branch changed, the answer is no. It was a localized effect that Agora One escaped due to being at extreme velocities."

Bodies were still strewn about, motionless and unconscious, although a few were starting to show signs of life through groans and grunts. Tequi went in search of his friend Raw. Noc continued, "Are all of your systems operational?"

"Recovery will be confirmed in three Earth minutes."

"Put all Piscorans on board in force field containment, as well as all humans other than Tequi, Raw, and those who participated with Zay in the rescue op. Confirm when finished."

"Confirmed. We are receiving a transmission from Turbo. Shall I put it through?"

"Find Tequi and have him take the call."

Tequi had just found Raw, who was slowly coming around. His cloudy eyes fluttered a bit and finally settled into a sleepy-slit position. He took a deep breath and recognized Tequi. "Where's Zay?"

Tequi studied his friend carefully. He appeared to be fairly normal. As long as Moden didn't resurface to get in his head, he just might be ok. Raw spoke slowly, nursing a deep bruise on his shoulder, "Where's Zay?"

Tequi sighed and looked his friend in the eye, "We don't know where, or when, she is."

"What?"

"It's kind of a long story. I'll explain later."

They were interrupted by Agora One's A.I. "Tequi, your ship, Turbo, is contacting you. Will you take the call?"

"Yes, go ahead, audio only."

"Tequi, you owe me some bottles for all this BS I just went through." It was Tabe.

"Tabe, is that you?"

"And Masher, too," Masher reported in a happy tone.

Tequi was curious, "I'm relieved. How did you get out of Morquellia?"

"Some crafty work by Turbo and Boomerang, along with some help from individuals that had breached the perimeter."

"Is everyone ok?"

"Yep, not a scratch, but Tabe has a bruised ego. How about on Agora One?"

"Zay has disappeared."

"We're all very sorry to hear that."

"And that's not the worst of it. She disappeared with Moden into a time rift."

Moments later, as Noc continued to confront the cold reality of his surroundings, he's once again called on by Agora One's A.I. "There is a cargo ship requesting permission to dock."

Noc, confused, answered, “A cargo ship? We can’t accept any ships docking right now.”

Agora One’s A.I. continued, “It is a personal delivery for you.”

“How can that be? Who’s it from?”

“Zay.”

Noc was stunned. “How is that possible?”

“Unknown. Will you allow the docking to commence?”

“Only after a full scan. I don’t want any surprises.”

Noc hurried to the nearest away bay. As he entered, he saw a sleek rectangular box being unloaded. He tried to confront the ship’s pilot, but was too late. A hissing noise and cold vapor escaped the metal box as it slowly opened itself.

“Computer, is that a cryogenics chamber?”

“Confirmed.”

Noc slowly approached and waited for the vapor to clear before he looked inside. When the picture came into view, he had a frozen moment that he thought wasn’t real. He thought he was looking at Zay, but that couldn’t be, could it?

As he was still trying to comprehend what he was seeing, her eyes slowly opened. She managed a slight smile. “Hi, dad.” She sighed deeply. “That was a long year.”

His heart fluttered. He smiled back. “You just went into the time rift with Moden less than an hour ago.”

She frowned, “An hour for you, a year for me.”

He was in shock. “How did you…?”

She cut him off, “First things first.” She raised herself out of the box slowly and continued, “Are there any Piscoran ships within scanning range?”

The ship’s A.I. answered, “There are no Piscoran ships within scanning range.”

“And is Piscora currently inhabited by Piscorans?”

Noc huffed. “You know that Piscora hasn’t been habitable for generations, Zay.”

“Piscora is currently inhabited by Piscorans.”

Noc was now starting to doubt his own sanity. This didn't escape Zay's attention. "It's a long story, dad."

Noc narrowed his eyes towards his daughter, "And what happened to Moden?"

Zay smiled brightly. "We won't have to worry about him anymore, or the Piscorans. Like I said, it's a long story. And maybe one day I'll tell it to ya. But not today."

To be continued…?

Agora One is part five of The Evolution Saga.

The Evolution Saga Timeline

2028 – **James Bong series** begins, bringing the message of truth/true anarchy through moral action, helping people defend themselves against the state, while simultaneously exposing the crimes of the state, All documented online, on various blockchain media platforms, becomes popular.

2029 – B. Light begins to plan and build a secret, voluntary community of anarchists at sea, in an effort to dodge the state completely and attain freedom. Calls it "The C.A. Salt Project"

2030-2053 – **C.A. Salt series.** Development of the "SeAgora".

2045 – Governments learn of "rebels" living undocumented at sea and begin black ops to hunt and destroy them. Part of this operation involves building a vast quantity of A.I. machines.

2053 – The dark occult ruling class begins to have their power usurped by A.I.

2078 – **SeAgora novel** – SeAgorists invent a way to separate dark matter/dark energy in a stable fashion, allowing for speeds many

times the speed of light. Land based governments, ruled by A.I., try to steal this information. In the process, the top two A.I. in the hierarchy fight each other and destroy themselves, plunging the ruling hierarchy into disarray. One of those A.I. had become addicted to a synthetic form of emotions for A.I. called “Emos”, which played a large role in the ensuing violent chaos and downfall.

2080 – **The Great Agora Space Race Series** – SeaAgorists achieve first successful launch of a SPEED drive, faster than light speed. Land based societies are split into loyalties to different A.I. factions.

2100 – SeAgorists launch into space to begin first human/A.I. settlement.

2578 – **Agora One novel** – The Voluntary Agora is spread across many galaxies. Only moral societies develop the abilities necessary to travel to and settle deep space. Agora One is a planet-sized ship, the first of its kind, able to travel across galaxies within weeks. Back on earth, those who kept the false belief in authority continued to plunge into deeper tyranny and became total slaves to EMO-addicted A.I.

Check out The Evolution Saga five part series by Todd Borho

James Bong – Agent of Anarchy

The C.A. Salt Project

SeAgora – A High Seas Adventure

The Great Agora Space Race

Agora One – A Space Adventure

toddborho.com